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"THIS IS OUR BRIDAL CHAMBER, BERENICE. ENTER, AND LAY THY HEAD UPON MY BREAST, AND OUR SLUMBERS SHALL BE SWEET. COME, MY BRIDE; I HAVE WAITED FOR THEE LONG."

THE MANIAC BRIDE; 3/51/40

Or, The Dead Secret of Hollow Ash Hall.

BY MARGARET BLOUNT.

CHAPTER I.

It was a wild, raw, November afternoon. The sky was dark and lowering; the wind swept down from the hills with a mournful, wailing

sound, and beneath the tall trees that bent before the gale, lay heaps of faded yellow leaves, trodden out of all shape and beauty by the feet that were continually traversing the narrow village paths.

Upon the hills, and out on the broad highway, the scene was dreary enough. But the little village of Banley, with its red-tiled roofs and latticed windows, all aglow with the blaze of fire-light, wore a look of cheerful comfort, heightened by the wintry aspect of the day.

Banley, lying far inland, was one of those primitive little places where the sound of the railway-whistle had never come. There was a branch-line, it is true, some twelve miles away, but few of its passengers ever found their way across the hills, and few of the inhabitants of Banley had seen the station, or tested the capabilities of the wondrous iron horse. Those who had done so, having returned in safety, became oracles among their neighbors, as people of deep experience, and one word of theirs outweighed a score from others who had not "seen the world."

The village, like most of its kind, consisted of a straggling street of cottages, with gay flower-gardens in front, and an inclosure for kitchen vegetables, and a few fruit-trees at the back. There was a church and parsonage, it is true, but the vicar was non-resident, being more deeply interested in the conversion of Irish Catholics than in the religious state of English Protestants, albeit they were of his own flock. Consequently the vicarage was shut up, and a consumptive curate, with a sickly wife and a family of seven children, lived in a cottage at the upper end of the village, keeping up appearances (by means known only to curates and their wives) on the pitiful salary of one hundred pounds a year.

Anxious and careworn enough the pair often looked; but they loved each other dearly, and were beloved by every one around; so it may be that their fate was not a hard one, after all.

The curate and his wife, poor though they might be, were the only people in the village who could properly be designated as "gentlefolk." The lord of the manor was non-resident, the manor-house itself being anything but a desirable home. If all was true that was told of the sights and sounds that had been seen and heard there, at different times, by different people, the poor man was very wise in not coming to look after his property in person.

Hollow Ash Hall was a haunted house.

It stood at some distance from the village, upon a green and fertile eminence, shut out from the common approach, though not from common view, by a high stone wall and a lofty pair of iron gates. There was a porter's lodge, untenanted, of course, and a small cottage within the grounds, which had once been occupied by some humble dependant of the family, in the day when that family was numerous and happy, and strongly united by the thousand sweet ties that bind a loving heart to home.

Seen from the public road, the hall was simply a square, brick-fronted English mansion of the ordinary type, comfortably and conveniently built, with stables, greenhouses, gardens, and conservatories enough to satisfy all the requirements of modern polite society. The yew trees at the back, and the long, bare lawn in front, gave it a melancholy appearance; but no one would have dreamed of calling it a haunted house, had they not been told that it had an undoubted right to the name. There was not even a hollow ash tree in view, to account for its unusual title. But the villagers, when questioned upon the subject, would look wise, and lead you to the top of a narrow damp lane, where grew a solitary tree, that had been touched by the scathing finger of the lightning, on its mission of destruction and death. That was "Hollow Ash," and that was the "Burnt-Ash Lane"; down which lane, as a sort of "short-cut" to the scene of their uncanny revels, it may be, strange figures were said to flit, as soon as the clock from the neighboring church had tolled the hour of twelve.

Not one ghost only haunted the place—there were at least three or four; and their names were more familiar to the persons who owned the manor than to any curious stranger who sought to pry into its secrets. But it must have been a bold man or woman who would have dared to ask a Vernon the question. They were a silent, haughty, reserved race, by no means addicted to the foolish practice of "wearing their hearts upon their sleeves." And if there was any one subject upon which they were more reserved than another, it was that of the haunted

manor. They left it; they could not live in it, but still less could they bear to talk of it: and so the mystery grew by feeding upon itself, till stories were told of the place that would have made the hair of the bravest and wisest listener stand upon end with horror.

It may be easily imagined what a commotion Banley was in one day, when the tidings spread abroad that a gentleman direct from London was about to rent the Hall. People stared at their neighbors, and shook their heads. It could not be; unless the newcomer hailed from Colney Hatch or Hanwell, he could not, for a moment, be thinking of such a thing.

But the news was confirmed in the afternoon by no less a person than the landlord of the "Vernon Arms," who recited to a group of eager and thirsty listeners his wondrous tale. The family from London were, at that moment, beneath his roof. So far from being denizens of a lunatic asylum, they were most respectable people—a city banker, his wife and two daughters, who came down for change of air, and seeing a fine house standing empty, naturally enough concluded that it was to be let. So, at the "Vernon Arms," in an after-dinner chat with their host, they managed to ask numberless questions about the mansion on the hill. He answered them truthfully; but he added, with a shake of the head as expressive as Lord Burleigh's: "He wished no harm might come of it"; for they laughed at the idea of ghosts; and one of the young ladies begged so hard to live in a real haunted house, that her papa had actually sent for the agent.

The landlord paused, drew a long breath, and so-laced himself with a great draught of his own ale.

At that moment, the agent himself was seen descending the stairs; the landlord, hurrying from behind the bar, threw the door wide open, with a low bow. But Mr. Grant declined the polite invitation, beckoned him out into the passage, and closed the door upon the gaping and disappointed rustics.

"I want to speak to you a moment, Grimes," he said, impatiently. "Is there no private place in this house?"

"To be sure—to be sure, sir!" replied the host. "Step this way, if you please. Becky, my love, pray go and mind the bar a little while. We want the parlor to ourselves just now."

Becky, who was the meek-faced mistress of the establishment, being thus addressed, took up the stockings she was mending, and went out without a murmur. The landlord closed the door behind her, and the agent nodded approvingly.

"Capital training you have her in, Mr. Grimes!"

"Well, sir, one's obliged to keep the whip-hand, or there's no end of kicking over traces, you know. Now, Becky there is the best woman in England, though I say it as shouldn't. But I should never dream of telling her so. The house would not hold the two of us together ten minutes afterward."

"Quite right, Grimes. The less you praise a woman, the better she behaves, as a general rule, I think. But now let us get to business. I am very much bothered in my own mind, Grimes, and I want advice."

Grimes, who had been busy over the fire with some mysterious preparations, which the agent affected not to see, now returned to the table, bearing two steaming tumblers of rum punch, which he put down with an air of triumphant self-satisfaction.

"I do believe, the very best I ever made yet, Mr. Grant," he observed, as he placed a cosey arm-chair before the fire for his visitor, and ensconced his own plump person comfortably within the depths of another.

"Good it must be, then, to a dead certainty," replied the agent, taking a long, delicious draught. "Enough to make a man forget one-half his troubles, and snap his fingers at the rest."

"I hope it will make you forget yours, then, sir," replied the landlord, who was dying with curiosity to know why he had been summoned to this particular conference.

"Ah, no such luck as that! The trouble to-night

is not strictly a trouble, after all. I am bewildered and bothered. I want to do a thing, and yet I can not tell if I ought. Grimes, you know the old Hall?"

The host nodded his head.

"I should think I did, sir."

"And you know what stories people tell about the place?"

"That I do. Old John Jones, the gardener, has made my flesh creep many a time, with his tales of the turret-chamber, and the butler's pantry and the secret room where the priests used to hide away, many, many a year ago."

"John Jones is an idiot!" said the agent, impatiently. "Upon my word, I believe the house is as quiet and peaceful as this old inn of yours."

Mr. Grimes took a sip of the rum punch, and said nothing.

"I have been through the place a hundred times—I dare say more—and I never saw anything there, nor heard anything, either, for the matter of that."

"Did you ever go there at night, sir?" asked Mr. Grimes, with a significant smile.

"No; I can't say I ever did."

And the agent smiled too.

"But you don't mean to say that you—a sensible, clear-headed man—really believe the rubbish they tell about the place? Now, do you?"

"Don't you, sir?"

"Of course not."

"Well, I should be sorry to have to sleep there, myself; that is all I know about it."

"Now, Grimes, tell me plainly what you think you should see?"

"Well, there's a lot of ghosts to choose from up there," said the landlord, meditatively. "You pays your money and you takes your choice. You can have a Jesuit priest, reading his mass-book; or old Vernon, counting his money-bags; or Queen Bess, looking after the farthing she dropped—"

"Pshaw! When was Queen Bess at Banley, I should like to know? Why, it was not built till she had been dead more than fifty years. What do they want with her ghost there?"

"Can't say, sir. But most old houses have a story about her and that blessed farthing. I wonder that she didn't take better care of it when she was alive. It has given her trouble enough since."

"Well, let her be where she may, I don't believe she is at Hollow Ash Hall."

"No more do I, sir."

"I knew it. You are a sensible man, Mr. Grimes."

"I don't believe in Queen Bess, nor in old Vernon, nor yet in the priest. There is one thing I do believe in, though."

"And what is that?"

"The last ghost. It's not yet more than twenty-five years old, you know. The ghost of the butler's pantry. You know what I mean, sir?"

"Pshaw!" said the agent, turning red.

"From things which came to my knowledge when I was a younger man than I am now, I shouldn't wonder if there was something in that. No wonder that Vernon could not live there."

"Hush, Grimes!" said the agent, looking nervously toward the door. "There are some things in this world that are not to be spoken of."

"Exactly. And I never have spoken of that to any one before for many a year. But it's my opinion the gentleman from London will pretty soon get sick of his bargain."

"That is what I want to see you about, Grimes."

"The bargain?"

"Yes."

"What ails it, sir?"

"Nothing at all."

"Is the gentleman willing to make it?"

"Perfectly."

"Liberal in his notions?"

"Very. He told me that he would pay just as

much for the use of the place as if there had never been any story about it."

"Very handsome of him. People generally expect to get a haunted house for nothing per year."

"Ah, but he laughed at the idea; and pays the actual rent of the place, just to prove that he has no faith in ghosts!"

"Well, I wish him joy of his new home, that is all."

"And so do I. However, if he has a fancy, it is no business of mine. But here comes the rub."

"I don't see it."

"Have I a right to let the house?"

Mr. Grimes stared.

"Why, you are agent?"

"Yes."

"Then who has a better right?"

"No one. But, you see, I don't know what Mr. Vernon would say."

"Of course he would be pleased."

"Do you think so?"

"I'm sure of it."

"I wish I was. Mr. Vernon is a very strange man."

"Queer as Dick's hatband, no doubt. But I don't see how he could be offended if you let the house. There it is, lying idle—no good to him, nor any one else. This gentleman has a fancy for seeing ghosts, and pays Mr. Vernon handsomely for it. What more can a man ask?"

"I don't know," replied the agent, looking thoughtfully into the fire. "And there is no time to write—that is the worst of it. Mr. Vernon is in the Holy Land, and I don't know how long it would take a letter to reach him. Now, this gentleman wants to go in at once. In fact, I am to give him an answer to-morrow. I'm terribly perplexed about it."

"I don't see why. Say yes, of course, and thank your stars for the chance."

"But if Mr. Vernon should be angry?"

"I don't see how he could be. Even if he was, he would have time to get cool again before he met you. I should take the offer, most decidedly."

"Well, I think I will. But I was quite undecided when I came in here, I assure you. But you are a clever man, Grimes, and one can't go far wrong in taking your advice."

"Thank you, sir. And now that business is well off your mind, let's drink the health of the new-comers, and wish them a happy home at Hollow Ash Hall."

Both laughed as they drank the toast. Then the agent rose, buttoned his coat, and turned to the door. The landlord saw him out; and after bidding him good-night, stood looking on beyond the town, at the hill, where the lonely house was standing, dark, silent and grim.

"Hollow Ash Hall let!" he murmured, as he went back to the bar once more. "Well, that is a go, and no mistake! I wonder how soon it will be empty again?"

CHAPTER II.

So the thing was accomplished. The haunted house was let.

The next day all Banley knew the tale by heart. The banker's name was Cowley, and the young lady who wished to see the ghost was Miss Rose Cowley, a pretty, fair little creature, who looked as if she would shriek and run away if a mouse crossed her path. Her elder sister Catharine (Miss Cowley), was a tall, dark-haired girl, with a high color and flashing black eyes—by far the most proper person, one would say, to encounter a denizen of the other world. But she did not approve of the project, and shuddered at the very name of the Hall. Mrs. Cowley, fat, fair and forty, took the matter easily, though in her heart she considered it a tempting of Providence; but she said nothing. She was devotedly attached to her stout, good-tempered husband; and had he chosen to walk into the crater of Vesuvius, I think she would have given one sigh to old England, and followed meekly in his wake.

Mr. Cowley, having made himself master of the Hall, was not long in paying it a visit. He took his family with him; and though they went in broad daylight, their carriage was escorted to the very lodge-gates by a select troop of rosy-cheeked children, who stared at Rose as if she had been the Dragon of Wantley in person.

Only to the gates, however, did this youthful body-guard venture. When the driver got down, and lifted the rusty bolt from its socket, the first creak dispersed the rabble like magic. A dire vision of Queen Bess in ruff and farthingale, coming down the avenue to meet those who sought to enter, affrighted them; and with one accord they set off at full speed toward the village, never daring to look behind them, or to slacken their pace until they were safe once more at their own mothers' sides.

Rose Cowley watched this exodus with laughing eyes; but her mother and sister looked as if they would gladly have followed the example of the children, and taken to their heels as well.

"Mercy preserve us!" said Mrs. Cowley, looking up at the Hall. "Who would have believed it was such a dismal place? Why, yesterday, from the road, it seemed very pleasant!"

"Dismal, mamma!" said Rose, "I think it is anything but that. Romantic—solitary—lonely, if you will, but surely not dismal!"

"It is only fit for rats and owls to live in," said Catharine, with a look of intense disgust. "What could papa be thinking of when he took it without even paying a visit to the place? However, there is one comfort—he likes snug, warm rooms as well as any of us; and the first glance at the interior of the old shell will be sure to disenchant him. We shall never live here, mamma; so you need not distress yourself at all about it."

"Don't be too certain," remarked Rose. "I was talking with papa this morning about it, and I asked what was to be done if the place should turn out damp and cold. What do you think his answer was?"

"Why, that in such a case we could not stop, of course."

"Not a bit of it," replied the mischievous girl.

"Papa said that he thought we were all apt to pamper ourselves too much, and that it would do us good to miss a few luxuries and comforts for a time."

Mrs. Cowley groaned.

"I shall have rheumatic fever, I know. Mr. Cowley will never be mad enough to live here. The house is like a well."

"Don't fear, mamma," replied Catharine, with an air of composed certainty, that was peculiarly provoking to Rose. "By the time papa has to go without breakfast and dinner once or twice, because the chimney will not draw, he will be ready enough to go away. Men may be stoics, and ascetics, and philosophers in theory easily enough, but all their fine doctrines go to the wall, I observe, when their stomachs come in question."

As she spoke, they drew up before their new home, and even Rose was obliged to confess in her own heart that it might have been a pleasanter one, when she looked up at the fast-closed door, and the blank range of dusky windows. Mrs. Cowley groaned again. The place was even worse than she thought; and she was wicked enough to pray secretly for a fit of the gout, or a smart twinge of lumbago, which should lay her lord and master flat on his back, and thus enable her to take him to Brighton—to town, even—rather than to this modern "Castle of Udolpho," which shocked her almost more by its outward dirt and discomfort than by the ghostly tenants which it held within.

"Now, my dear, let me help you. Jump out, Rose, and see which of us all will find the haunted chamber first," said Mr. Cowley, coming to the door of the fly, his round, red face beaming with delight at the evident trepidation of his wife and eldest daughter. "Jump out and see how you like your future home. You are as good as the lady of the manor, now, Mrs. C. What do you think of that? Did you ever ex-

pect to attain to such dignity, even in your wildest dreams of the future?"

"I certainly never expected to come to such a place as this," said Mrs. Cowley, piteously, as she left the fly.

"Queer old den, isn't it, my love?"

"Very queer!"

"But I dare say you will like it in time. It is a fine, airy place, I can see. Catharine, you will have cheeks like cabbage-roses in no time."

"Papa, you cannot think of living here!" said that young lady, in dismay.

"Can't I, my dear? But I do, and for this very reason: the world is getting far too romantic and fanciful to suit me. What with spiritualists, and table-turning, and men who float in the air, and men who see things in a crystal, and haunted houses, and seers who make almanacs, and all the rest of it, England seems to be going stark staring mad. I used to give my countrymen a little credit for common sense, but I can scarcely recognize them now, and I hold that any one who makes a firm stand against this new-fangled nonsense is a public benefactor. I mean to do it, and to make you do it too. For this reason I take this house which the silly idiots about here say is haunted. Not one among them dare come near the place. I'll show them that I'm not afraid to live here. And then, perhaps, they will come to their senses again, and learn that people in the other world are glad enough to get quit of this. Ghosts, indeed! I have no patience with such nonsense!"

"But, papa, if they should come?" suggested Rose, with a timid glance at the close-shut house.

"If they do, I'll pinch their noses with the tongs!" said Mr. Cowley, solemnly, and Rose burst out laughing.

"But, papa," said Catharine, "the house is so damp!"

"Damp! Nonsense! It is as dry as a bone. Don't you see that it stands on the top of a hill? How could the water get up here, I should like to know?"

"I am sure it does, and you will have lumbago, and mamma rheumatism, and Rose a sore throat, and I a perpetual influenza. Dear papa, do give up this scheme, and take us to Brighton instead."

"Oh yes, I think I see myself doing it!" was the grim reply. "Take you to Brighton to wear a pork-pie hat on the sands, and show your ankles on the pier! No Brighton for you at present, miss. You will stay here and do your fellow-countrymen a service, if you please, by disabusing their minds of a stupid prejudice, by means of your own experience. Driver, have you got the key to this door?"

"Here it is," said the man. But he fell to the rear after presenting it. He was a lad of nineteen, and had heard too much of the place not to keep at a respectful distance during the first moment of investigation.

"This lock has not been oiled since the year one!" said Mr. Cowley, puffing and blowing, as he tried to turn the key. "Hang the thing, how it sticks! Bear a hand here, my good fellow, will you? Hallo!"

The key turned suddenly, as he spoke, the lock yielded, and the door flew open with such violence that Mr. Cowley landed on his nose in the hall. Seeing this, his wife forgot her fears, and ran to pick him up. Rose and Catharine followed; and so, at last they stood together beyond the threshold of the haunted house. While Mrs. Cowley and Catharine were helping the head of the family to his feet, Rose gazed around her with breathless awe, half-expecting each moment to see some dim shade approaching to wave them away. But no one came. All was still and quiet. They stood within a small, square hall, very dusty and dirty, and lighted only by the fanlight over the door. A worn mat covered the floor, there was a small iron stove in the center of the hall, and, leaning against it, a curiously-carved walking-stick, resembling the wand of a magician

rather than the ordinary cane of a gentleman in the nineteenth century. Rose took this in her hand, but quickly laid it down again. It did not seem "canny" to hold it—though why, she could not say.

Mr. Cowley rubbed his head, felt his nose carefully all over, and pronounced himself quite sound.

"What made me fall, I cannot tell," he remarked. "It really seemed as if the door was jerked from my hand by some person inside. Do you know, my dear, I incline to the opinion that some evil-disposed person has harbored here at some time or another, and taken advantage of the popular belief in ghosts to carry out all manner of iniquity in perfect safety. For aught we know, such a person may be within hearing now."

Mrs. Cowley gave a little shriek.

"Then we are all safe to be robbed and murdered! Dear George, do let us leave this place, and get home as soon as possible."

"Nonsense, my dear; don't interrupt me, if you please. Robbed and murdered, indeed! Is that likely, while you have me to protect you? I merely made that remark as a warning, in case such a person should be concealed here. I recommend that person not to come too near, whoever he may be, and I add, for his further information, that I shall sleep here with a revolver, loaded and capped, by my side, and if he begins any of his tricks upon travelers, I will give him pepper, by Jove! Now, Mrs. C., come along and look at the rooms."

Trembling and disgusted, the good lady followed her truculent spouse, as he opened door after door within the mansion. The rooms were all dark and dingy, it is true, but they had high ceilings, and plenty of windows with pleasant aspects. Soap and water, and afterward pretty curtains and bright furniture, a piano, and a few pictures, would make quite another place of it, as Mr. Cowley said.

Nevertheless, as the party progressed from room to room, a silence fell over them all—a nameless weight seemed to rest upon every heart. Mrs. Cowley looked really ill, Catharine was very pale, Rose ceased to laugh and jest, and even Mr. Cowley pursued his investigations in a nervous, fidgety way, as if he was ill at ease.

Did you ever visit an empty house, dear reader, by yourself? A lonely country cottage, for instance, with no evil tale hanging over it, like a dark cloud—nothing to mar its beauty—nothing to take from its aspect of home comfort and peaceful repose? Passing from room to room, with the bunch of keys dangling from your hand, did you not begin to feel that something unseen, but not unfelt, was bearing you company—something that opened the doors and looked out of the windows, and pointed at the corners of the apartments, as if to illustrate a story which you also felt, but did not hear? Did not that unseen companion become almost too real—almost visible at the last, and actually drive you from the place—not frightened—not nervous—oh no!—only with pale lips and hurried steps, and a hand that shook a little as it gave the keys back in the agent's office, and wrote down the direction to which that agent might apply?

All this, and more than this, did the party at the Hall experience. Something, nay, more than one something was beside them, after they opened the second room. No one spoke of the presence, yet all were conscious of it, though they tried to laugh it off, even in the recesses of their own minds.

The rooms were all unfurnished; but in one, "the turret-chamber," as it was called, though it was not built in turret fashion, Rose came upon a tangled relic of the past.

It was a large oaken cabinet, black with age. Its doors were open. As they approached it, the setting sun broke from a bank of thin white fog, and filled the whole apartment with a ruddy glow. Rose, ever curious, was the first to search the cabinet.

There were several toilet-ornaments in Venetian glass and gold, upon the upper shelf. Upon the lower

one lay a small yellow packet, and a fragment of an old letter. Rose took it up eagerly, and read these words, traced in a delicate, yet unformed handwriting:

"And so I send the gift, but I fear it will outlive your love. Last night, when you left me, you forgot my good-by kiss; and so this morning I thought—"

There the fragment ended. It was the old, old story, coming down from remote years. Woman's tender love—woman's pained recognition of a slight—woman's faith, mixed sweetly with woman's fear of losing what she prized far more than anything else the world had to bestow. Rose stood musing with the torn paper in her hand, till her father spoke.

"Poor little goose! I wonder where she and her lover are now? What is in the packet, Rose?"

The girl broke the string. A long tress of dark-brown hair fell lightly over her hand. That was the "gift," no doubt, which was still fresh and glossy, while the head on which it grew was, perhaps, lying low in the grave.

Rose laid it reverently back beside the letter. Mr. Cowley fidgeted about a moment or two, and then said that they had better go. He had evidently seen enough for that day, at least. As for Rose, the dead girl's words seemed sounding in her ear all the way home.

"Yet why dead?" She asked herself that, as she woke with a start, at two o'clock the next morning.

Mrs. Cowley went back to the village-hotel in a more agreeable frame of mind. She fondly imagined that the gloom and silence of the Hall had been too much even for the jovial spirits of her husband to encounter. Brighton looked nearer than ever, as she sunk placidly to sleep that night.

But the next morning undeceived her. Mrs. Cowley was up with the lark, and when she descended with the girls to the nine-o'clock breakfast, he was not there.

"He had gone to the Hall," meek Mrs. Grimes informed them, with a courtesy.

"To the Hall!" gasped Mrs. Cowley, in dire dismay. "What for?"

"Mr. Grimes went with him, mum. They took out a lot of painters and plasterers, mum. Not to speak of the two charwomen as is to go next week."

"Mercy preserve us!" exclaimed the horrified British matron. "Is the man in his senses? Can he think of living there, after all that we saw last night?"

"Mrs. Grimes shook her head and sighed.

"Men is that contrary, mum, that an angel from heaven would not well know what to do with them!" she observed sympathizingly. And certainly, after living so many years with Simeon Grimes, she ought to have been a judge.

Mrs. Cowley took her breakfast with what appetite she might. At noon, her liege lord appeared, dusty, tired, and cross. From him she learned that the workmen were progressing favorably, that the place would be ready for the charwomen by the end of that present week, instead of the next, and that everything would be finished by the last day of the month.

"So get ready to move in on the 1st day of December, old lady," he added merrily, "for we shall keep our Christmas there!"

The "old lady" groaned at the thought. What sort of a Christmas would it be in that dismal, lonely, haunted ruin?

But Mr. Cowley carried his point, as he always did. Day after day did he spend at the Hall, sometimes with Mr. Grimes, sometimes with the agent, but oftener alone with his workmen, who did their tasks in platoons, and would, on no account, stay on the premises a moment after sundown. Not so the charwoman who succeeded them. She was a stranger in the place, and felt no reverence for its traditions. Consequently, she refused to believe in the ghosts; and when Mr. Cowley heard her avow her want of faith, in a great strong voice and in a hearty laugh, he was so enchanted with her good sense, that he

engaged her on the spot to remain at the Hall as servant, till the scruples of the neighboring damsels should be sufficiently overcome to enable them to serve with or under her, or perhaps to take her place. But for her opportune arrival, Mrs. Cowley might have been forced to make her own bed, get her own dinner, and black her husband's boots—for no village-girl could have been induced, for love or money, to engage at the Hall, till it was fairly proved whether Queen Bess was there or not.

Mrs. Macarthy, however, was a host in herself, and the sight of her broad smiling face was enough to put the most crabbed ghost into good-humor, if by chance she should happen to meet one. She worked with a will during the week of her occupancy. Carpets were put down, curtains hung up, beds aired and made, drawing and dining-rooms swept and dusted; till, from the dismal shell, on which Mrs. Cowley had looked with such horror, a handsome modern-looking dwelling-place was erected, possessing every comfort which the most fastidious taste could require—at least, for a short sojourn. Mr. Cowley might have been less liberal in furnishing any other house, but here his honor was, in some measure, at stake, and he was not satisfied till he had done his very best.

He came home late on the evening of the 30th of November, and announced, with a pleased smile, that all was ready for the removal. Rose scarcely knew whether to be glad or sorry that her often repeated wish was about to be granted. In her heart she began to feel a little timid, though she would have gone to the stake rather than acknowledge it. Catharine shed some tears, but her father only laughed at her. As for Mrs. Cowley, she packed her trunk as if for an expedition to the Feejee Islands, and Mrs. Grimes assisted her, groaning dismally, the while, over the "contrariness of them men."

At two, P. M., all was ready, but Mr. Cowley never made his appearance till five. Then taking a mournful farewell of Mrs. Grimes, the devoted wife and mother entered the fly, and drove heroically away.

The gates of the Hall stood wide open this time to receive them, and Mrs. Macarthy was smiling and bowing at the door. Lamps were lit in the hall, and fires burned in every room. Beautiful carpets, curtains, and furniture, together with books and pictures, and a piano, so transformed the gloomy drawing-room, that the girls scarcely recognized it. Mr. Cowley was in ecstasies at their exclamations of surprise.

"I knew you would like it," he kept repeating, as he rubbed his hands together; "and I have spared no expense in making it pleasant and comfortable for you. Now, my dear, if you will go up-stairs and take off your things, Mrs. Macarthy will give us some tea. I, for one, am as hungry as a hunter. My love, I am glad you like the place so well. Was I not right in urging you to come? I knew you would see it in the end—and you do!"

CHAPTER III.

BUT did they "see it," after all?

Grave enough was Mrs. Cowley's face, as she sat down to that first meal in her new house. The tea was hot and strong, the toast nicely buttered, the cold ham cut with Vauxhall nicety, yet she could not eat. If a door creaked, she started nervously in her chair; if a mouse gnawed at the wainscot, she looked as if she was about to faint. Yet the habit of obedience to her husband's wishes was so strongly implanted within her breast, that she never even dreamed of saying how uncomfortable she felt. Mr. Cowley had made up his mind to live in a haunted house; consequently, a haunted house must be the best place possible to live in. She was serving her fellow-creatures by proving to them that the doctrine of ghosts must be false. No martyr ever underwent more agony for the sake of a good cause than she.

At last the meal was over, and the ex-charwoman had cleared away. The group drew closer around

the blazing fire, Mrs. Cowley took her knitting; Miss Catharine, with an air of making herself at home, performed wonderful feats with her crochet-needles; Mr. Cowley pished and pshawed over the columns of his Times, which, in the hurry of removal, he had not an opportunity to read before. All were employed except Rose, and she evidently found it very hard to settle to anything. She walked about the room, till her father growled out a request that she would not fidget him; so then she lifted the curtain, and gazed out for a long time upon the bare and desolate lawn, looking more desolate still beneath the pale light of the wintry moon.

A thought struck her as she stood there. She gave a little delicious shiver, then left the room, and went up-stairs.

The turret-chamber had been prepared for her by special request. Miss Cowley's room was exactly opposite, so that the sisters could easily communicate with each other, if necessary. Mr. and Mrs. Cowley had chosen a large, square chamber at the back of the house, and the revolver was all ready lying on a table close beside the bed. Fires were blazing brightly in all these rooms. They looked exceedingly snug and cosy in the ruddy glow. Still, not the less for fire and candle did Rose feel the unseen presence of some former inhabitant of the place. She hurried nervously down the passage, entered her own room, took a book from her dressing-bag, and retreated without daring even to give a glance at the oaken cabinet in the corner. Quicker and quicker she went on her way back, breathing short, and feeling terribly frightened, though ashamed that she should do so. She to live in a haunted house, and have no more nerve than this! The thing was ridiculous; she would be more sensible. And making a brave effort to feel collected at the head of the stairs, she heard, or fancied she heard, some one breathing close behind her; felt, or fancied she felt, the touch of a cold, light hand upon her own. She shrieked wildly, and ran headlong down, only to find the whole family in the hall, looking pale and frightened, and evidently ready to face twenty ghosts, for the benefit of whose fleshless noses Mr. Cowley grasped the tongs.

"Good gracious, Rose!" exclaimed her mother, trembling from head to foot. What is it? Have you seen anything?"

"No," said Rose, looking extremely silly; "but I was all in the dark at the head of the stairs, and I fancied some one touched me."

"I wish to goodness you would be sure of your danger, young lady, before you scare us all out of our wits another time," said Mr. Cowley, leading the way back to the drawing-room, and depositing the tongs in their proper place once more. "I made sure by your squalling that old Queen Bess, at the very least, was after you. If you are going to fancy ghosts in every direction, you had better go back and take shelter with Mrs. Grimes as soon as you can. Why, here's Kitty, who couldn't bear the idea of this house, and look at her now. She don't like it, I dare say, and she may believe there are ghosts here; but I don't think she would invent them for herself beforehand, as you seem to have done. No more nonsense, Rose, if you please, or every one in Banley shall know that you, who were so eager to get here, were the first to cry out 'Wolf!' half an hour after you came."

Mr. Cowley having delivered his lecture, resumed the perusal of his Times. Catharine said nothing, it is true, but even her crochet-needles, as she worked, seemed to assume an air of superiority over Rose. That young lady sat, looking sulky, beside the fire. Human nature prompted her to throw her book at Catharine's head, but young-lady nature came to the rescue, and prevented any such untoward act. At last, her sense of injury subsided as she drew near the lamp, and began to read.

Certainly she had chosen the queerest volume possible for such a place. It was Mrs. Crowe's "Night-Side of Nature"; a book well calculated to give a

sound nightmare even to the most incredulous opponent of the ghost theory.

For some minutes, she was very quiet; but Mrs. Cowley, looking up from her knitting, got a glimpse of the illustrated cover, where, beside the old hall clock, and by the light of a splendid harvest-moon, a genuine orthodox ghost, in a winding-sheet, is appearing to a terrified maid-servant, just preparing to faint upon the floor.

One look was enough for Mrs. Cowley. She uttered an exclamation that drew every eye to the unlucky book. Mr. Cowley looked over his spectacles at his daughter, as if he thought she had suddenly gone mad.

"What could have possessed you to bring that horrible thing here?" he asked, sternly. "It is the greatest nonsense, only fit to go into the fire. I have half a mind to make you put it there now."

Miss Rose, at that moment, owed her entire family a grudge; and having frightened herself nearly to death with the grisly tales she had been reading, suddenly determined to frighten them also.

"If I can't sleep a wink to-night for thinking of these dreadful things, neither shall Catharine," was her amiable resolve.

So, putting on her sweetest smile, she looked up from the obnoxious book into her father's face.

"Dear papa, you are just a little prejudiced against Mrs. Crowe—you know you are."

"Prejudiced! By Jove! I go a great deal further than that. I should like to see her well shaken; I should like to shake her myself, in fact. First, for believing such nonsense herself, and then for writing a pack of stories, enough to turn a whole nursery of children into dangerous lunatics. I wonder if she lets her own children read that wretched book!"

"I can't say. But if you would only let me read you one story, papa—"

"Read to me! a ghost-story to me! Rose, I begin to think you must be going mad!"

"I'm not, papa; and this particular story is vouched for by your *beau ideal*, Mr. Howitt."

"I don't believe it."

"But it is, indeed! There is his name! And he had the account of the haunted house from credible witnesses."

"Oh, yes; of course!" sneered Mr. Cowley. "However, I don't care if I hear that one tale. I should like to see what kind of a case he can make out of such outrageous rubbish!"

"I won't bother you with a long story; but just hear what Mr. Drury says he saw at the haunted house in Willington, where Mr. Howitt went afterward."

She began to read:

"About ten minutes to twelve, we both heard a noise, as if a number of people were pattering with their bare feet upon the floor; and yet, so singular was the noise, that I could not minutely determine from whence it proceeded. A few minutes afterward, we heard a noise, as if some one was knocking with his knuckles among our feet; this was followed by a hollow cough from the very room from which the apparition proceeded. The only noise after this was as if a person were rustling against the wall in coming up-stairs. At a quarter to one, I told my friend that, feeling a little cold, I would like to go to bed, as we might hear the noise equally well there; he replied, that he would not go to bed till daylight. I took up a note which I had accidentally dropped, and began to read it, after which I took out my watch to ascertain the time, and found that it wanted ten minutes to one. In taking my eyes from the watch, they became riveted upon a closet door, which I distinctly saw open, and saw also the figure of a female attired in grayish garments, with the head inclining downward, and one hand pressed upon the chest, as if in pain, and the other, viz., the right hand, extended toward the floor, with the index-finger pointing downward. It advanced with an apparent cautious step across the floor toward me; immediately as it approached my friend, who was

slumbering, its right hand was extended toward him. I then rushed at it, giving, as Mr. Proctor states, a most awful yell; but, instead of grasping it, I fell upon my friend, and I recollected nothing distinctly for nearly three hours afterward. I have since learned that I was carried down stairs in an agony of fear and terror.

"I hereby certify that the above account is strictly true and correct in every respect.

EDWARD DRURY.

"NORTH SHIELDS."

"What stuff!" exclaimed Mr. Cowley. "Is there any more, Rose?"

"A little, papa. An account of a ghost seen in the same house by two young ladies.

"The first night, as they were sleeping in the same bed, they felt the bed lifted up beneath them. Of course, they were much alarmed. They feared lest some one had concealed himself there for the purpose of robbery. They gave an alarm, search was made, but nothing was found. On another night, their bed was violently shaken, and the curtains suddenly hoisted up all round to the very tester, as if pulled by cords, and as rapidly let down again, several times. Search again produced no evidence of the cause. The next day, they had the curtains totally removed from the bed, resolving to sleep without them, as they felt as though evil eyes were lurking behind them. The consequences of this, however, were still more striking and terrific. The following night, as they happened to awake, and the chamber was light enough (for it was summer) to see everything in it, they both saw a female figure, of a misty substance and bluish gray hue, come out of the wall at the bed's head, and through the headboard, in a horizontal position, and lean over them. They saw it most distinctly. They saw it, as a female figure, come out of, and again pass into, the wall. Their terror became intense; and one of the sisters, from that night, refused to sleep any more in the house, but took refuge in the house of the foreman during her stay; the other shifting her quarters to another part of the house. It was the young lady who slept at the foreman's who saw, as above related, the singular apparition of the luminous figure in the window along with the foreman and his wife.

"It would be too long to relate all the forms in which this nocturnal disturbance is said by the family to present itself. When a figure appears, it is sometimes that of a man, as already described, which is often very luminous, and passes through the walls as though they were nothing. This male figure is well known to the neighbors by the name of 'Old Jeffrey!' At other times it is the figure of a lady, also in gray costume, and is described by Mr. Drury. She is sometimes seen sitting wrapped in a sort of mantle, with her head depressed, and her hands crossed on her lap. The most terrible fact is, that she is without eyes.

"To hear such sober and superior people gravely relate to you such things, gives you a very odd feeling. They say that the noise made is often like that of a pavior with his rammer thumping on the floor. At other times, it is coming down the stairs, making a similar loud sound. At others, it coughs, sighs, and groans, like a person in distress; and, again, there is the sound of a number of little feet pattering on the floor of the upper chamber, where the apparition has more particularly exhibited itself, and which, for that reason, is solely used as a lumber-room. Here these little footsteps may be often heard as if careering a child's carriage about, which, in bad weather, is kept up there. Sometimes, again, it makes the most horrible laughs. Nor does it always confine itself to the night. On one occasion, a young lady, as she assured me herself, opened the door in answer to a knock, the house-maid being absent, and a lady in fawn-colored silk entered, and proceeded up-stairs. As the young lady, of course, supposed it a neighbor come to make a morning-call on Mrs. Proctor, she followed her up to the draw-

ing-room, where, however, to her astonishment, she did not find her, nor was anything more seen of her."

At this stage of the reading, Mrs. Cowley, who had been listening in a perfect agony of fear, suddenly found strength to rebel.

"Rose, shut that book instantly!" she exclaimed. "No, Mr. Cowley, I will not sit and hear such things! I've got a creeping down my back already, and my arms are all gooseflesh; and I wouldn't hear the rest of it if you gave me five thousand pounds—there!"

Rose closed the book. Her father did not object, but drew his chair closer to the fire, and glanced nervously over his shoulder as he did so. Catharine looked very pale, though she made no remark, and Rose was satisfied. It was a pleasure, if a malicious one, to think that not one of them all would dare to go up-stairs in the dark at that moment, any more than she would. And she felt quite sure that if the lady in gray, "without eyes," came to her bedside that night, Catharine's couch would by no means remain unvisited.

There was a short silence, broken by the sound of a rapid scuffling step in the hall. They looked at each other somewhat timidly, and Mrs. Cowley gave a little yelp of terror, when the parlor door was flung violently open. But nothing worse than Mrs. Macarthy stood there; Mrs. Macarthy, no longer ruddy and laughing, but pale and frightened, as she had once vowed she never could be.

"I wish you would step this way, sir," she said, addressing Mr. Cowley eagerly. "Something queer has happened out there."

"Oh, gracious!—the ghost—the ghost!" screamed Mrs. Cowley.

"No, ma'am—at least, nothing that you can see. But it isn't exactly improving to the spirits to sit and hear it all by one's self. Do come out, sir, and listen."

Mr. Cowley went. The rest, seized with a sudden panic, ran after him.

Mrs. Macarthy led the way to the kitchen, where she had been sitting reading "Love and Revenge; or, the Bandit's Revenge and the Maiden's Choice," by the light of two tallow candles, and a blazing fire large enough to roast an ox. Mr. Cowley looked round curiously, so did the girls, clinging very close to their mother all the while.

"Hark!" said Mrs. Macarthy, holding up her finger; "there it is again!"

They listened with bated breath.

From behind a closed door on the right-hand side of the kitchen came a strange continuous sound.

"The rocking of a cradle, by Jove!" said Mr. Cowley. And Mrs. Macarthy nodded assent.

"Some confounded trick! Have you opened the door?"

"I tried, sir."

"Well?"

"It would not come open."

"Why not?"

"It is nailed up, sir."

"Didn't I tell you so?" exclaimed Mr. Cowley, gaining fresh courage from this circumstance. "Some rascal has got in there to frighten us out of the place, so he can carry on his usual games with impunity. Give me the hammer, Mrs. Macarthy, and I'll break the door open. I'll cradle the fellow with a vengeance. I wonder if one of you would have pluck enough to go for my pistol?"

"I'll go," said Rose, growing very brave in the belief that a trick was being played upon them. She was not afraid of anything human, even though it came in the shape of a masked burglar at midnight; and she ran and brought the pistol, without giving a thought as to anything that might still be lurking on the stairs.

When she got back, her father had finished his task, and was just about to open the door. Still the cradle rocked on unceasingly. He bade Mrs. Macarthy bring a light, and took that in one hand and a pistol in the other. Mrs. Cowley and Catharine shivered in the background, but Mrs. Macarthy and Rose

stood stoutly on either side of the door, eager to get the first peep at the mysterious room.

"Now, you fellow, whoever you may be, I give you fair warning!" called out Mr. Cowley, in a loud voice.

Still the cradle rocked.

"I have got a loaded pistol in my hand, and the moment I catch sight of you, I shall fire."

Still the cradle rocked.

"Do you hear me, you scamp? I'll learn you to cut those capers here!"

Still the cradle rocked.

"I shall count three!" roared Mr. Cowley, getting into a rage; "and then I shall fire!"

Still the cradle rocked.

"One!"

Still the cradle rocked.

"Two!"

Still the cradle rocked.

"Three!"

Still the cradle rocked; and, for the first time, they heard, distinctly, a sweet female voice, as if singing to a child within.

"Oh, gracious!" screamed Mrs. Cowley.

Mr. Cowley looked aghast, but quickly recovered himself.

"Another trick; but you sha'n't frighten me with your confounded nonsense. Stand back all of you. Here goes!"

He gave the door a tremendous kick, which sent it flying from the hinges. At the same instant he fired.

And still, when the echo of the shot had died away, they heard the self-same noise—the self-same cradle-song.

Mr. Cowley entered the room, and held the light high above his head. It was a small, square closet, like a butler's pantry, with no window, no other mode of ingress or egress than the door. It was impossible for any one to escape; nor was there a single living thing in the place except himself. Yet the cradle rocked, and the song was sung while he stood there—almost at his very feet.

He stepped back into the kitchen, looking very pale, feeling very sick and faint.

Rose caught him by the arm.

"O papa!" she whispered with white lips—"the place is haunted, and we were wrong to come. What shall we do? Look at mamma!"

It was, indeed, time to do so; for Mrs. Cowley lay in strong hysterics upon the kitchen floor. Catharine had fainted, and Mrs. Macarthy was bending over them both, alternately administering restoratives. Mr. Cowley raised his wife in his arms; Rose and Mrs. Macarthy supported Catharine between them.

And as they left the haunted room, the cradle was still rocking, the low nursery-song still sounding in their ears.

CHAPTER IV.

WHEN the good ship Port Philip came sailing home from Australia to England, many an anxious parent, or lover, or friend, awaited her arrival upon the harbor-pier, eager to welcome those who had been so long absent, and who were now returning to leave their native land no more.

Most of those wanderers had left their homes and friends in search of gold. Some had been successful, and were returning in the first flush of victorious pride—some had failed, and were coming back like the prodigal son of old, willing to eat even the crumbs that might fall from the parental table, so that the diet of the empty husks, in a far land, should be theirs no more. Some were strong and happy, some were ill and sad; but for all alike a welcome was waiting the moment they touched the land.

For all, did I say?

There was on one board, for whose arrival no friend was watching—one who came unnoticed and unknown to the land of his birth—one for whom no home more genial than an inn would open wide its doors. Among the eager and excited throng who talked to

themselves and each other of the friends they hoped to see, he stood a silent listener, with no story of the kind to offer in return. When they landed at last, his late companions were lost to his view among groups of relations or acquaintances; but not a hand was outstretched, not a voice was raised to welcome him. He stood a few moments watching the interchange of greetings, the prayers, the tears of grateful joy, then turned away with quivering lips and eyes moistened with tears.

"Shall I never be missed—never be mourned—never be rejoiced over like that?" was his thought as he passed from the pier into the busy streets, and made the best of his way to a hotel, to which he had been recommended by the captain of his ship. "Three-and-twenty years old, and the world before me! That sounds well; but when I know that the world contains no love, no home, no happiness, that I may honestly claim— Ah, well, never mind! I'm not going to be a baby, and cry for the moon; so adieu to sentiment of every kind, while I drop anchor in this bustling town. Here is the Eagle right before me, and, for the sum of one guinea, I can purchase smiles without number from the worthy host."

So saying, he entered the Eagle, and ordered his dinner. But sad thoughts still seemed to haunt him; and when the repast had been cleared away, he sat brooding over the fire, biting rather than smoking his cigar, and pulling the ends of his mustache with a frown. At last, some memory of the past touched him too keenly. He broke into a bitter laugh.

"The fool I was when I was young!" he thought to himself. "How well I remember the wild dreams that kept me company when I began the race! What wonderful things I was to accomplish then! How soon I was to build up my fortune! How I was going about doing good—comforting the sad, relieving the poor, raising up the oppressed! How soon I accomplished all those schemes! How much better the world must be to-day because I have lived in it!"

His face grew still more sad as he mused.

"I laugh at these things now, yet it makes me unhappy. That would have been a beautiful life, if I could but have lived it. I would rather have the heart of those days, that could plan the scheme, than this I must now own, that can only ridicule it! But the young romance has gone. It haunts me no longer. My nature is as barren and worldly as—as even she could desire!"

There it was, you see. That irrepressible "she," who is sure to be at the bottom of every perplexity and trouble a man can know!

He tugged at his mustache fiercely, and flung his cigar into the grate.

"I can see the place, now, as if in a dream," he groaned. "Those hills and distant mountains; that calm sky, so 'darkly, deeply, beautifully blue;' the sheep upon the hillside, and the cattle in the pasture, chewing the cud lazily, and lying still to feel the warmth! And that other day, or week later, when the sky was heavy with rain. A chill, raw wind blew from those hills, the roadway wet and sodden; so was the glen, through all its fallen leaves. Yet she stood there, bright and gay, and restless, and happy. She let the wind blow through her curls—she lifted her face to catch the falling rain. Great Heaven! how beautiful she was! And I have lost her—I shall never see her again!"

He groaned, and covered his face with his hands. Five minutes passed, then he started from his seat.

"This won't do!" he ejaculated. "Byron says:

'Man, being reasonable, must get drunk.'

I agree with him; but one can't well get drunk before the orthodox hours of ten or eleven, P. M. Then no one minds it. It is now six o'clock—four hours before I can carry out the Byronic theory. I know not what I'll do. I'll go to town, and see my uncle and my little pet, Rose."

He rung the bell for a "Bradshaw"—found that an express-train started for London at half-past six. At that time, to a minute, he was on his way to Mr. Cowley's house in Mecklenburgh square.

CHAPTER V.

Nor at Mecklenburgh square, however, was the worthy banker, as we well know, but shut up in a haunted house, and resolutely determined to stand his ground there, in spite of all the ghosts that ever walked.

In vain his wife shed tears, and his daughters entreated to be taken from that horrible place. He bore pleadings and tears alike, like a stoic. Mrs. Macarthy refusing to do her work in the haunted kitchen, became, of necessity, a fixture in the parlor, and actually did all her cooking there. Yet still Mr. Cowley held out with Spartan firmness.

"We must frighten him," said Rose. And that evening, she made her appearance with a fat manuscript book, into which, from time to time, she had copied such things as struck her fancy. She announced to the circle round the fire that she was going to give them a legend which would make their hair stand on end; and still Mr. Cowley smoked placidly, and did not look the least alarmed.

She began to read:

"A small, brown cottage at the end of a long and lonely lane. Small and brown, and almost ruinous—the wide kitchen only being in repair, and the wild winds howling through the rooms around.

"Out of doors, a long barren moor spread out before us, the cold white snow covering it as far as the eye could reach. The distant mountains, snow-capt, and their sides covered with dark and gloomy woods, added to the dreariness of the scene. Not a human habitation was in sight—not a wreath of pale blue smoke curling brightly upward, to tell us that some other than ourselves moved and breathed in that cold solitude. Our own fire crackling and blazing, and the ruddy glow it cast through the uncurtained windows, were the only signs of civilization near.

"We had traveled from the distant city to this lonely place but the day before, and the contrast between the busy streets, with the roar and rush of business, and the tide of life continually flowing on in their narrow limits, and the dead silence of these lonely regions, broken only by the melancholy cry of the owl, or the shrieking of the homeless wind, delighted me. True, I knew nothing of the purpose for which we came, but I waited till Lionel should unfold it, and enjoyed with a keen relish the sense of comfort I experienced when I looked around the large old-fashioned room, with its brightly blazing fire and flickering light—my friend at one corner of the fireside and I at the other, each seated in large easy-chairs, and between us a table covered with fruits, a choice volume or two, and some precious bottles of the far-famed Rhine wine.

"Lionel sat with his face shaded by his hand, apparently lost in a reverie; and that I might not interrupt it, I took a book from the table, snuffed the candle, and began to read.

"The hours wore away insensibly, and when I rose to replenish the dying fire, I saw by my watch that it was after eleven. I held the watch toward Lionel, that he, too, might see the time. He snatched it from my hand with a fearful groan, and dashing it to the floor, trampled it in a thousand pieces. While I stood and gazed at him with no little astonishment, he sprang up, grasped both my hands, and burst into a flood of tears.

"'I will tell you all,' he said, when his heavy sobs ceased. 'This is the last hour of my life. I brought you here that I might have one friend near me to the last. You must see it all. Then go tell those who know me how I died. Hush!—don't speak!' he added, as he saw my lips move. 'Let me tell you, while I have yet time. You have read of men who sold themselves body and soul to the Evil One. I have heard you laugh at the idea. But you will laugh no more at it after this night. I tell you now what I never dared tell you before, lest I should lose your friendship. The thing is true. I have so sold myself, and this night he—my owner—comes for me!'

"One of three things is sure," I said. "You must be joking, or mad, or I am dreaming!"

"Do I look as if I was joking, Paul? Mad I may be; I don't know. But this is true. Sixty years ago, when your father was but a young man, I sold myself for long life and princely wealth, but most of all for a woman!"

"How I loved her! I would have lost heaven a thousand times for her, and she knew it well. I was no longer an old man, Paul, when that fearful bargain was completed. I stepped at once from poverty, and loneliness, and care, into ease, wealth, youth, and happiness. In their enjoyment I forgot how they had been purchased."

"Well, I must speak quickly, if I would speak at all. I prized my wife more than anything I possessed, and you may imagine how I watched over her. I feared she would love another—that my soul would be lost in vain."

"At last the dreaded danger came! I found them in each other's arms, Paul, and I stabbed them both to the heart!"

"You!" and I tried to free my hands from those which were red with human blood. He held me with a frantic grasp.

"Paul, Paul! You are the last friend I have on earth! Don't fail me now! They were fearfully avenged—for he was her brother!"

The miserable man paused, and looked up at me with a face the horror of which I can never forget.

"Yes, I murdered them, and from that night they have never left me. All day they sit beside me, though no eye but mine can see them. At midnight she takes a shape, and comes to torment me. There is no rest, no hope, no peace for me. This night can bring no greater torture than my whole life has been. I am no coward, but the thought of what will soon take place awes me, and I dare not meet it alone. Promise me solemnly that you will stand beside me to the last. Promise by your hope of heaven and your faith in God!"

"I promise!" I said, with a deathly faintness stealing over me. "But oh! is there no hope of escape? Let us fly before the midnight comes."

He shook his head.

"It is useless—I must meet my doom here. Here I murdered them: where you are sitting he sat, and dabbled with his feet in their warm blood. Sit still!" and he forced me back into the chair. "It was many, many years ago, and the pool dried up long ago. You cannot even see the stain of it now."

A low, silvery, mocking laugh stole through the room as he spoke; and at our feet a stream of blood began to flow, that spread itself over the uneven floor—now losing itself, encircling a knot, now falling into a deep crack, with a dripping sound that was horrible to hear. Lionel wrung my hand.

"The hour is near," he said, in agony. "Remember your promise."

"Even as I remember mine!" said a voice, as clear and sweet as the laughter we had heard.

"She will soon be here," he gasped. "But before my torture begins, listen to my last words. Tell my daughter to pray for me each day in the Convent of Saint Agatha. She is young and innocent, and it may be that her intercessions will avail. I leave her in your charge. As you deal with her, so may God deal with you!"

A sound like the baying of hounds came up the lane. His face changed like the face of one that is struck with death, and he clung to me for support.

"It will soon be over, Paul! Don't leave me!"

The fire behind us, that had been burning low, now leaped up with a sudden flash, and we saw a snow-white greyhound enter at the door. I knew, by its large, dark human eyes, that it was the shape that came to him each night. It sprang upon him, and sought eagerly for his heart. And then I saw a fearful sight—the heart still beating, though almost torn away.

A cry of agony burst suddenly from Lionel's lips.

The hound sprang down again upon the floor, and with her small and delicate paws she traced

rivulet of blood here and there, till a shape was drawn upon the floor before us, from whose pierced breast the torrent seemed to flow. From the parted lips came Lionel's last words—"Tell my daughter to pray for me each day in the Convent of Saint Agatha." Then a shout of fiendish laughter shook the house, and following Lionel's outstretched finger with my eye, I saw at the window a countless crowd of faces, mocking and gibing at his despair.

A wild gust of wind, that could not be of earth, went shrieking round the house, and I saw them crowding toward the door. In a moment the room was filled.

The white hound disappeared, and in her place arose a woman fair and stately to behold, with wild dark eyes, and long flowing hair. Beside her arose another, like unto her, but less beautiful, and silently they gazed upon their murderer.

Even in that fearful moment, when I gazed into Lionel's white face, his eyes were turned upon her, and the love and anguish there were not for himself or his fearful doom.

Slowly, slowly he followed her, as she held out her fair white arms, his feet plashing at every step in the blood upon the floor. Slowly, slowly they passed away from the room, while I stood there like one dead, without the power to move or call him back! Slowly, slowly they passed down the long lane, that fair shape leading him! Then a burst of fiendish laughter came peeling back to me, and I was alone. My eyelids closed!

And so I slumbered, while over mountain and moor that fearful company bore my friend away. But when the pale gray dawn came stealing through the window, I awoke, and went out to search for him.

Down by a lonely spring I found him, his pale cheek lying on the uncut ice—his long fair hair filled with the drifting snow, and on his brow a mark as if a kiss of fire had been left there. There he lay—cold, and pale, and silent; but the spirit had left forever, and countless footsteps, like the footsteps of an army held off toward the distant mountains. His soul had gone to meet its doom!

Rose looked up from her reading with a grave face, to see what effect her ghastly tale had produced. To her great surprise, no one seemed affected by it. Even her mother was dozing tranquilly over her knitting, and her father was smoking his pipe, and sipping his gin-and-water, with an air of positive enjoyment. He nodded good-humoredly at her over his glass.

"Very pretty, my dear, and very well read, but I feel as brave as a lion after it. You'll have to get something more real—a little less German—if you want to scare your poor old father into fits, Miss Rosey. Why, even your mother goes placidly to sleep under that nonsense about selling souls, etc. We are too prosaic for that rubbish in the nineteenth century, I fear."

"Perhaps this will keep my mother awake," said Rose, darting a look of vengeance at the offending lady. "There is nothing German about this ghost-paper. It is as English as any one can desire."

"Let us have the tale, by all means then. I quite enjoy the fun, my dear!"

"Fun! Do you call this fun? Listen!"

Two lovers stood in the little parlor of Doctor Montrose's cottage looking out upon the moonlight with an absent air. The girl, a tall and stately creature, with eyes and hair of a deep chestnut color, and a head balanced like a queen's, on sloping shoulders and arching neck, was speaking earnestly.

"Why do you fear me?" she asked. "When I am faithless to you, then there will be no faith left in the world."

The young soldier looked into her fair face with a smile.

"So you think now, my Berenice; but you are young and beautiful, and it is a long time for you to wait."

"But you will have your commission soon,

Alfred. I will wait till you come for me—never fear!”

“I fear you were born for something better than a common soldier’s wife,” was the sad reply.

“Than a common soldier’s wife—yes!” she said, with a proud lifting of her beautiful head. “But you will be more, Alfred—a general, you know, before either of us are old and gray.”

“Yes, I know,” he answered, absently. And then his fine face lit with sudden enthusiasm, as he took her hands in his, and said, “Swear, Berenice, by all you hold sacred, and by all your hopes of heaven, that when I gain my commission and come for you, you will go with me?”

“I swear, by my hopes of heaven, and by all that I hold dear and sacred here on earth!” she answered, unhesitatingly.

Alfred De Rohan’s countenance cleared, and he held her to his heart, calling her his bride, his dear wife, from whom nothing but death could part him.

“Nay, not even that!” she said, yielding to the intoxication of the moment, and leaning over him till her red lips touched his cheek. “Not even that, my love; for if by any chance thou shouldst go before me, I will surely find some way to follow—some way to join thee, wherever thou mayst be!”

It was a rash vow to make, for who can say what shall befall them, as the years of fate roll on?

A rash vow! But having made it, how did it happen that two years after, Berenice was the bride of Hugh Clymer, the richest banker in Lombard street?

The “happy” bride! so people thought and said. She thought at times, with a strange, restless terror, of that broken vow.

De Rohan was still absent, still silent. Had he heard of her perjury; and would he come and accuse her before her husband and her friends? Or was he dead and quiet in the grave? With a guilty feeling at her heart, she hoped this last supposition was a true one.

Suddenly the envied mistress of “Clymer Hall” fell ill. A gradual wasting sickness had been creeping over her for weeks. She had struggled against the lassitude while she could, and lay down at last upon her bed in dogged despair. But as the long and tedious days passed on, she tired of her splendid apartments, and longed for her home. There, at last, they removed her; and in the very room that had sheltered her infancy and girlhood, they laid her down, a bitter, wrathful woman, submitting to God’s dispensation only because she must, and in her secret heart defying Him, as, of old, Ajax defied the lightning’s stroke.

It was the custom of the family to assemble in the sick room after dinner, and discuss the news of the day, or engage in cheerful games that would not disturb the invalid. She would lie quietly watching them, though seldom joining in the conversation, and never swelling the merry shout of laughter that often ran around the room, when her little brothers and sisters were present.

The Doctor joined the circle later than usual one rainy afternoon.

“I have been detained with a patient,” he said, in his bustling way, “and must be pardoned for my delay. But I stopped at the post-office as I came home, and found enough to win my pardon. Here, my dear wife, are two letters for you—here, Mr. Clymer, are your dailies, and a host of business envelopes—here are some London pictorials for my girls and boys—the *Lancet* for myself—what shall I give you, Berenice? Nothing left but the ‘Army List,’ upon my word!”

“I will take it,” she said, with a trembling eagerness, so unlike her usual manner that they looked at her with surprise.

Her father gave it to her, and settled himself down to the perusal of his *Lancet*, with an air of deep satisfaction. Mr. Clymer was busy with his letters, and Mrs. Montrose deep in the perusal of hers—the little boys and girls were opening their eyes widely

over the marvels of a London newspaper, and the kitten played with a ball that had dropped from Eddie’s hand.

It was a picture of domestic happiness and peace. But Berenice trembled from head to foot over her Army List, and her dark eyes went rapidly up and down the pages, searching for that one name. It was not there. With a sigh of relief she was laying the book aside, when her eyes fell upon these words:

“James H. Leslie, Captain, vice Alfred De Rohan, deceased!”

He had got his promotion, then, and he would come for her. She remembered her vow, that not even death should come between them. She seemed to feel him drawing her away, even from that quiet domestic circle, claiming her as the bride of the grave; and throwing up her arms with a shriek of despair and terror, she fainted. Startled out of their happy quiet, the group gathered around her, but the cause of her illness was a sealed mystery to them.

It has been said that every house has its Blue-Beard chamber. It is a truer saying than we imagine. Even in the peaceful home of Dr. Montrose the hidden place existed.

For on the second floor of the house was a small corner room, never entered except by him. The door leading into the hall was always carefully locked—the blinds and windows carefully closed—and its only communication with the outer world was by a pair of wooden stairs, going down into the garden from the outside of the house, and effectually concealed by the tall maples growing near, from the curious passers-by.

This corner room had always been the bugbear of Berenice’s childhood. If she was naughty, the threat of being shut up there never failed to reduce her to obedience. And as she grew up into womanhood, she could never pass the door without a feeling of mysterious horror.

And yet this same apartment was the delight of the good Doctor’s life. It was there that he pored over his dusty books and charts—there that he made experiments with rusty crucibles and half-worn retorts—there also that he practiced anatomy, when, by dint of skill and money, he could succeed in procuring “a subject” from the city hospital, and getting it into the house without the knowledge of its inmates. For his neighbors in that small country place were not sufficiently near to watch his movements.

On the evening of the day already alluded to, the worthy Doctor hurried all the inmates of the cottage to bed at an early hour, alleging the sudden indisposition of Berenice as an excuse. Mrs. Montrose remained with her child. The little ones retired. Mrs. Clymer followed. The Doctor shut himself up in his mysterious corner room, and silence reigned through the house.

Nestled close to her mother’s side, Berenice slept; and sleeping, she dreamed.

She seemed to stand, one dreary, rainy afternoon, at the barred and latticed windows, tapping with her small fingers upon the glass, and wishing sadly that her long-absent lover might return. Suddenly her ears caught the sound of martial music—the bray of trumpets and the silver clangor of horns. She leaned from the casement, with an eager hope beating at her heart, and from the far east she saw a vast army, marching toward her home. With colors, and banners, and plumes flying in the breeze, they came slowly on; and as they neared her, she saw what she had not before noticed, that one of the banners was draped with black, and that the bands were playing a funeral march.

She watched them with an inward thrill of horror as they halted before the house. She looked round in desperation for some one to stand beside her—some one who loved her; but they were gone, and she was to meet her fate alone. The sorrowful ranks

fell apart, and a tall, slender man, wearing a captain's uniform, stepped forward and read from a paper which he held. Her dulled ear could just distinguish the words "James H. Leslie, Captain, vice Alfred De Rohan, deceased," repeated slowly over and over in a sepulchral voice, till she thought she should go mad.

Suddenly the music burst out in a wild funereal swell; and as it ceased, four men in black, with their faces veiled, brought out a coffin from the ranks, and laid it at her feet. The lid was thrown back, and there, dressed in a captain's uniform, with the rain beating down upon his face, lay De Rohan.

She tried to cry out, but the words died upon her lips. She opened her eyes, and saw the familiar chamber; heard the low breathing of the quiet sleeper beside her. But she also saw, by the faint light of the dying night-light, a pale hand parting the curtains of her bed, and a paler face looking in upon her.

Those features—that fair hair, and those large blue eyes—surely she should know them! It was De Rohan—paler than before, but otherwise the same.

"Alfred," she said in a trembling voice, "is it you?"

"It is I, oh falsest among women!" was the stern reply. "Is this my reward for years of toil and danger, to find thee another's? And yet thou shalt be mine! Dost thou remember thine oath?"

"I remember!" said the conscience-stricken woman.

"I come to claim thy promise—arise and follow me!" said the specter, laying upon her arm an icy hand, that chilled her to the bone.

The figure glided from the room. She could see now that it was shrouded for the grave. Trying in vain to utter a prayer in this, the hour of her extremest need, she followed.

Through the long gallery the figure glided, and the same impulse urged her on. At the door of the corner room the figure stopped, and waved its hand.

"This is our bridal chamber, Berenice. Enter, and lay thy head upon my breast, and our slumbers shall be sweet. Come, my bride; I have waited for thee long!"

The door swung slowly open, and the figure disappeared. With a frantic bound, Berenice sprang after, and crossed the threshold of the mysterious room.

"The mist seemed suddenly to clear from her eyes as she stood within it. With a bewildered air she looked around at the strange and unfamiliar instruments—at the stuffed birds and beasts—and the grimy skeleton, hung on wires—and the figure of the good Doctor, fast asleep, in his chair.

"Something stretched out on a long wide board, just beyond him, and covered with a sheet, arrested her attention. Treading softly, yet trembling from head to foot, she crossed the floor and drew the sheet away.

"A dead body lay there—the body of a man some twenty-eight years of age. She gave one startled look at his face.

"Good heaven! how like—how like to Alfred De Rohan! and yet it could not be. She dropped the sheet, and burst into a wild, unearthly laugh.

"Berenice—good heaven! how came you here?" cried the Doctor, startled into wakefulness by the dreadful sound.

"She only looked in his face, and laughed vacantly. The shocks of the day and night had been too great for reason to bear.

"Berenice was a maniac, and the dead captain was avenged!"

As the story ended, Mr. Cowley yawned, laid down his pipe and lit his candle.

"Good-night all!" he said. "Those tales make me so sleepy, I must be excused."

"Papal the cradle is rocking!" said Rose, turning pale.

"Never mind, dear, let it rock!" was the bland reply. And that was all they got by reading frightful legends through the evening to Mr. Cowley.

CHAPTER VI.

"TEA is ready, if you please, Mrs. Magnum."

At that announcement, made in a very clear yet pleasant voice, Mrs. Magnum started out of her nap, which she had been enjoying in the depths of her velvet chair, rubbed her eyes, and looked up at a young lady who stood on the hearth-rug, a few paces from her.

"Eh? What did you say, Miss Marjorie?" she asked, sharply.

"Tea is ready," replied Miss Marjorie, taking her seat at the head of the table as she spoke.

"Humph!" muttered Mrs. Magnum, eying her with a sour look of dissatisfaction. "Well, you may pour me out a cup. But where is Mr. Magnum, and Julius, and dear Kate? It is really extraordinary, that when I am so punctual myself, every one belonging to me should be perfectly unable to understand the value of time, or come to their meals at the proper hours. I am sure, when I was a girl, my mamma would have—"

What her mamma would have done in a similar state of things, Miss Marjorie never knew; for at that moment, the door opened, and a corpulent, red-faced, good-humored-looking man entered, closely followed by a fashionably-attired young lady of seventeen, and a fat, stupid-looking boy of twelve. The young lady subsided into a graceful attitude upon the sofa; the boy established himself at Miss Marjorie's elbow, and began an indiscriminate assault upon the eatables; but Mr. Magnum dutifully supplied his wife with a cup of tea and plate of bread and butter before beginning his own meal, which he took at the small table which always stood beside her easy-chair.

"Well, my dear," he said, cheerfully, "how has the world used you to-day?"

"As usual," was the whining reply.

"The neuralgia any better?"

"No, my dear."

"And the headache?"

"As bad as ever."

"Dear! dear!" said Mr. Magnum, sympathizingly.

Mrs. Magnum sighed, and leaned her head upon her hand.

She was the invalid of the family. From early morn to dewy eve she sat in her velvet chair, and, during nine months of the year, before a fire hot enough to roast an ox. The atmosphere of the parlor was so stifling as to make a stranger feel faint after breathing it for five minutes at a time; but Mr. Magnum and his son and daughter inhaled it contentedly enough. Miss Marjorie, indeed, was constantly troubled with giddiness and determination of blood to the head; but she was only a companion, and no one paid much attention to her ailments, unless they were of an obstinately-intrusive kind. So, through the sharp winter, the double windows of the parlor were closed and padded, and list was nailed around the doors, and sand-bags laid at every crack and crevice, lest a breath of cold air should by any chance steal through; and the invalid, basking before the piled-up grate, dozed, and ate, and drank, through the short days and long evenings, till the light and heat of summer forced her to live a little less like a salamander, and a little more like a human being.

Mr. Magnum was a retired ironmonger, who had made money enough out of his pots and kettles to leave them forever, in his fifty-fifth year. It had been his father's business before him, and he had started therein at the age of twenty-one, with the snug sum of one thousand pounds as pocket-money, to say nothing of a trade-connection extending half over the Black County. Yet, in speaking of the earlier part of his life, he was accustomed to allude to himself pathetically as a "poor orphan," and to hint mysteriously at terrible hardships undergone by

him—leaving you to infer that those hardships had been surmounted by him alone, without the slightest aid. The story had a somewhat ludicrous effect when you gazed at the face of the narrator, and heard the puffing sighs with which his obesity compelled him to interlard it. Certainly, no one looked less like a "poor orphan" than he!

Tea was at length over. Mrs. Magnum nestled herself into the easiest corner of her easy-chair. Julius went out, the fair Kitty began to crochet, and Mr. Magnum read the paper laboriously aloud. If any one listened to political speeches and stock-lists, it was not Miss Marjorie. She sat in a far corner of the room, ostensibly engaged in correcting a French exercise of Miss Kitty's, but really thinking of a time and person far, far away.

At last, Mr. Magnum put down his paper and turned to his wife, with the air of one who has a secret of importance to reveal.

"My dear, who do you think I met at the works to-day?"

"How should I know?" replied Mrs. Magnum testily. "Some horrid iron-master, I presume."

"No, my love; quite a different person. A banker. You must remember hearing me speak of him. Mr. Cowley, of Mecklenburgh Square."

Miss Marjorie looked up, flushed and agitated, from her drawing; but no one heeded her.

"Mr. Cowley," replied Mrs. Magnum, slowly. "Yes, I remember hearing you speak of him. What is he doing here?"

"You would never guess, my love. He has a house."

"In this neighborhood?"

"Yes, within a mile of us."

"But what house can there be to let so near? I know of none. Do you, Kitty, darling?"

"No, mamma."

"Yes, you do," both of you," replied Mr. Magnum, triumphantly. "Only it is just the last house any one in their senses would think of taking. It is Hollow Ash Hall!"

"You!" screamed Mrs. Magnum from among her cushions.

"It is true, my love. Cowley has taken it."

"What for?"

"To live in."

"Is he mad?"

"No—quite sane."

"How long is he to stay?"

"I can't say, my dear. I only saw him a moment."

"Who is with him?"

"His wife and two daughters."

"Then they must be mad!"

"So I should say," replied darling Kitty from her sofa.

"I never heard of such a thing, Mr. Magnum."

"Nor any one else, my love. All Banley is wild about it."

"Quite likely."

"Cowley says it will do good."

"How?"

"He thinks that people will not be afraid of the place after any one has lived in it."

"Stuff and nonsense!"

"So I say, my dear."

"How long have they been there?"

"Nearly a week."

"Have they seen anything?"

"Well, to tell the truth, I asked him that."

"What did he say?"

"Just what you said a moment ago."

"What?"

"Stuff and nonsense!"

"Ah, but did he mean it?"

"I think so. He was quite short with me because I asked."

"What did he want at the works?" inquired Mrs. Magnum, after a moment's pause.

"A shovel and a pickaxe, and two or three other tools."

"Then he has seen or heard something; and he is going to pull the Hall to pieces in order to find it," replied the lady with unusual energy.

Mr. Magnum shook his head.

"I wonder if the place is haunted?" he observed, in a musing tone.

"Good gracious! how can you doubt it?"

"People often tell such ridiculous stories about old places like that. What if all the sights and sounds should be nothing but—rats!"

At this heresy, Mrs. Magnum held up her hands in horror.

"Rats, Mr. Magnum! Do you pretend to be wiser than the whole country-side?"

"By no means, my love."

"Well, every one says the place is full of ghosts!"

"Yes, my dear."

"What every one says must be true!"

Mr. Magnum did not dare say no.

"And so the place is haunted," repeated his better-half, triumphantly.

This was a fair specimen of her usual style of reasoning, which she was pleased to consider forcible and eloquent in the extreme.

Miss Kitty laid down her crochet, and joined in the conversation.

"You know, papa," she observed, "that several people have really seen Queen Bess."

"Yes, my child."

"And don't you remember when we drove by there late one night last summer, how the headless horseman rode behind us all the way till we drove into Banley?"

"There was a horseman behind us, my dear; but he might not have been headless."

"Might not!" replied Mrs. Magnum, sternly. "Of course he was! What business could he have had upon that road at that time of night if he had his head upon his shoulders, like any other Christian man?"

"And his horse stopped so strangely," resumed Miss Kitty. "I never shall forget how frightened I was!"

"Nor I either," said Mrs. Magnum. "I am sure when you came in here you were as pale as death, and your feet and hands were like stones. If the horseman had not been headless, of course he would not have scared you!"

"Ugh! I could not live in that old house for the whole world," said Kitty, shrugging her shoulders.

"Does Mrs. Cowley like it?" asked Mrs. Magnum.

"No—I think not."

"Then why does she stay?"

Mr. Magnum coughed and looked embarrassed.

"My dear, Mr. Cowley is a very peculiar man—very. I am afraid he generally does what he likes, without consulting his wife."

"And she lets him?" exclaimed Mrs. Magnum, shutting her lips viciously.

"I am afraid she does!"

"Well, if women will be fools, they must. But I only wish I was Mrs. Cowley!"

Did Mr. Magnum wish so, too? If so, she never dreamed it.

"Never mind Mrs. Cowley; I dare say she is a goose!" exclaimed Miss Kitty. "I want to know something about the young ladies. Are they pretty?"

"I did not see them, my dear; but the people in Banley say they are."

"And nice, I dare say. I should like to know them. Are there any sons?"

"Not one!"

Kitty's countenance fell.

"I suppose it would not do to call there?" she suggested.

"Not unless you want to be scared into a frenzy," was her mother's severe reply. "How can you ever think of such a thing?"

"Banley is so dull. I should like some nice friends—that is all."

"Well, you can't have these young ladies, Kitty, till they live in a Christian place, remember that."

Do you feel tired, Miss Marjorie? You don't look quite well."

"I am rather tired," replied the governess.

"Then, pray, don't sit up longer than you like."

Miss Marjorie took the hint, put away her work, said good-night, and left the room. Two pairs of eyes followed her with anything but loving looks.

"Nasty, proud thing, I hate her!" said Kitty, in a low tone.

"And so do I!" replied her mother, with emphasis.

"But she will be going next month, so we need not trouble ourselves about her."

CHAPTER VII.

MISS MARJORIE did not, however, go to her own room. She took a cloak from its peg in the hall, threw it over her head, opened the front-door softly, and went out. Mrs. Magnum would have been shocked out of all her propriety if she had seen her pacing up and down the garden-walks alone; but just at that moment Miss Marjorie cared little for Mrs. Magnum, or anything she could say.

The night was dark and starless, the air chill and raw. But after that heated room it was a positive luxury to feel the fresh, damp wind coming from the hills. After those sharp unnerving voices, it was soothing to listen to the leafless trees sounding and whispering of the coming of the rain. Storm, and cold, and darkness—they were all preferable to that snug parlor and its disagreeable inmates; and so Miss Marjorie paced up and down, up and down, and thought.

Thought of another time which was far happier than this! A time when she was also a companion, but not Mrs. Magnum's companion? A time when there was one voice that always softened when it spoke her name; when there were eyes that brightened at her coming—lips that welcomed her as only privileged lips might do! She thought of long, pleasant evenings, spent with books, and work, and music, around a cottage fire. Of quiet walks and talks by summer moonlight! Alas! where have those blissful moments fled? Why had the dearest, the sweetest of ties deserted her? Why, from that wealth of love and tenderness, had she been cast out into the cold world alone?

She had been foully slandered; she had been cruelly distrusted, she had been heartlessly deserted! Over and over again had she said this to herself. Yet on that night, as she walked up and down the graveled path, the sense of injury and of wrong seemed to die away, and in their place came a wild yearning for the olden time—but for one moment of the happiness of yore!

"Oh, that it were possible,
In this dull life of pain,
To find the arm of my true love
Around me once again!"

she murmured, as she clasped her hands above her aching heart. Where was he? What was he doing now? Beautiful and bright, he had risen like a star above her lonely path; had won her heart, and worn it for a time; had bound her to him by the most sacred ties; then left her for years, perhaps forever! Where was he—where was he? And she stretched out her arms to the sullen night-sky in her vain and passionate appeal to him who would come no more.

The sky grew darker. A drop of rain touched her cheek. She turned to go in, yet, with a strange, uneasy feeling, she lingered a moment beside the gate looking out upon the dark road that led into the village. Then her eyes wandered away beyond Banley, and out toward the hill where the haunted house stood. How strange the unseen and unacknowledged link that bound her to the people there! What would they say when she went in among them and told her tale? Would they think her mad, or would they take compassion upon her for the sorrow she had undergone, and admit her to their family-circle as a welcomed and honored guest? Was it likely? Had they ever heard her name? Yet how

well she knew theirs: and how much she could tell of their daily life and habits, from the stern banker down to his favorite daughter Rose—"Cousin Rosel Cousin Rosel!" She said it aloud twice, and then started and flushed guiltily, lest any one should have heard her.

Some one had heard. Not Mr. Magnum—not even Kitty, but a tall, handsome young man, who had been walking along the public road, with his hands in his pocket, and his head bent down. He had passed the garden-gate without even looking that way; but the low voice made him start and turn round. In an instant he had leaped the iron fence, and stood by Miss Marjorie's side.

"Have I found you at last?" he exclaimed. "I have looked for you all over England, and in vain. Now, Marjorie—"

But Miss Marjorie looked in his face, gave a low cry, and fainted.

He caught her in his arms and kissed her passionately.

"Marjorie, my love—my darling—look up, and speak to me!"

Slowly she revived. Slowly she came to the knowledge that life was no longer a blank—that he had returned, and that he loved her still.

"Oh!" she sighed, "is this a dream?"

"No dream, but truth, my darling!"

"Are you sure? I have dreamed so many times."

"But you are awake now. Awake to hear me say that I wronged you—that I was a jealous, suspicious fool to listen to a word against you; awake to see me kneel at your feet and ask your pardon! Look, Marjorie! Look, Marjorie! I won't rise till you say you have entirely forgiven me!"

"My love—my love!" answered Miss Marjorie, bending over him with a radiant smile. And then the long misery of the past was wiped away and forgotten.

"But where have you been?" she asked when the first surprise was over. "Where have you been, and how did you know I was here?"

"I have been in Australia, my love. I would not come back till I could lay a fortune at your feet, as some amends for all I have made you suffer, and I can do it now. Thanks to spade and pickaxe, I am a rich man, and you shall have a new silk dress every day, and eat off gold and silver plate, if you like, Marjorie!"

"As if I cared for that!" she mused, kissing him.

"No, I know you are not mercenary; but still, money is one of the best things you can have, my child. Money and love—love and money—any one who can get those two things may think himself remarkably well off in this vale of tears, Miss Marjorie. And you have both; and if you don't feel obliged to me for getting them, you are a very ungrateful young woman, I must say."

"Oh, I do—I do! But how in the world did you know I was here?"

"I did not. That is the strangest part of the story. I came home to England lonely and sad enough. For three years I have been trying to find you out, through agents and advertisements, in vain. Where have you been?"

"I taught in a school at Brixton for two years after I lost you; and then one of the pupils—daughter of Mr. Magnum—"

"The gentleman who owns this house?"

"Yes. His daughter was educated at that school, and she guessed I would be a suitable companion for her mother, who is ill, or who fancies herself so, at least. I have been here a year. I shall leave in a month's time."

"In a week—in a day!" was the impetuous reply.

"Do you suppose I am going to have you slaving here now I am at home again? You will pack up your traps to-night, and be ready to go with me when I call for you to-morrow, which will be as soon after breakfast as I can get over from Banley. Do you hear?"

"Yes, but I must give some notice."

"Not a bit of it. Are they kind to you?"
 "Not very."
 "Do you like them?"
 "Not at all."
 "You don't mean to say that they have ill-used you?"
 "Oh no."
 "But, in fact, you hate them?"
 "Exactly."
 "Poor darling! And you have had a year of this drudgery?"
 "Never mind. It is all over now."
 "That it is."
 "But finish your story. Tell me how you happened to find me here."
 "Do you know that my uncle Cowley is here?"
 "Yes."
 "Shut up with his family in a house full of ghosts?"
 "I have heard of it."
 "I went straight to his house, in Mecklenburgh square only to find it empty. The housekeeper gave me his present address, and on reaching Banley, I found his name in everybody's mouth. If he has seen half the sights and heard half the sounds the villagers relate, he must be a lunatic by this time. In the place of waiting till to-morrow to pay my visit, I thought I would go to-night, and see if there was any truth in these marvelous tales. And while I was walking along, thinking only of ghosts and hobgoblins, I heard a little voice say plainly in the darkness, 'Cousin Rose!—Cousin Rose!' It was the voice I had been hungering and thirsting to hear for three long and weary years. Now you know the whole. Were you thinking about Rose?"
 "Yes."
 "You will like her dearly. She is a good little thing, and will make a sister of you the moment I tell her your story. Will you go there with me to-morrow?"
 "Will they welcome me?"
 "Of course they will, you goose! Oh Marjorie!—my own Marjorie! they will love you for my sake, even as I love you for your own, you wicked, fascinating, cruel little monster!"
 "Hel hel hel! That's prime!" said a boyish voice in the shrubbery; and Marjorie started from her lover's arms.
 "Julius, is that you?" she cried.
 "I should rather think it was!" the promising youth replied, standing out upon the gravel path.
 "I've been watching you two for ten minutes at least, and haven't you been going on kissing and hugging! Oh my! won't mother go into a tantrum when she hears of it! I sha'n't have to learn any more Latin lessons! You'll have to pack, Miss Marjorie, as sure as eggs is eggs! Heigho, jeminey, and a rigdum!"
 His exulting dance was speedily brought to a close. Mr. Cowley, who had kept silent so far from sheer astonishment, now grasped him firmly by the collar.
 "You young scoundrell!" he exclaimed—"how dare you speak in that manner to Miss Marjorie?"
 "She's my governess; I shall say what I like to her!" was the impertinent reply.
 "And she is my wife! And if you dare to breathe a word about her—to look at her insolently—to insult her in the smallest way—I'll give you such a flogging that you will never want to utter a lady's name again as long as you live! Do you hear, sir?"—and he shook him in the air as a terrier shakes a rat.
 "Oh, oh! let me go! I'll call my father!" shrieked the frightened boy.
 "Hold your tongue, you whelp! Where is the key to the garden-gate?"
 "In the hall, sir!"
 "Go and get it—and don't let any one see you! Be quick!"
 Julius, thoroughly subdued, ran up the steps, and in a moment re-appeared with the key.

"What are you going to do, Charles?" asked Miss Marjorie, wonderingly, as he opened the gate and held out his hand to her.

"I am going to take you away with me."
 "Impossible!"
 "I don't know what that word means!"
 "But I have not even got on my bonnet."
 "Never mind, your cloak will protect you, and we have not far to go. Into that house you shall never step again, after the specimen of your treatment I have just seen."

He drew her out upon the footpath, and turned to the boy, who stood with open mouth at the gate.

"Lock it, and go in," he said.
 "But what am I to say to mother?"

"Tell her that Miss Marjorie has gone away with her husband," was the laughing reply. "Come, my love, draw your cloak well round you. I never ran away with a lady before; but, upon my word, this eloping with one's wife is a very pleasant thing!"

And so, while Julius ran in with his wonderful news, and sent Mrs. Magnum into a fit of screaming hysterics, the strangely re-united pair walked on arm-in-arm, through the darkness, toward the haunted house.

CHAPTER VIII.

To walk straight up to the door of a strange house, with nothing but a plaid cloak thrown over your head, requires a considerable amount of nerve and courage. At every step of the way Miss Marjorie's scruples grew stronger—her sense of outraged proprieties more clear. At last she came to a dead stop, just as they reached the outer gate of Hollow Ash Hall.

"What is it now?" asked Mr. Cowley, patting her hand encouragingly.

"I really can't go in, Charles!"
 "Nonsense!"

"They will think I am mad. Only see! I know that my hair is half down, and I have no bonnet! Don't make me go there, Charles, till I am more presentable—there's a dear!"

"Madam, do you intend to obey your lawful husband, or not?" said Mr. Cowley, with mock-solemnity.

"But, Charles, do hear reason!"
 "No, I won't! I have had enough of reason in my life. So come along, my love. The moment you enter yonder door, you will get a warm greeting for my sake, and no one will stop to think whether you have a bonnet on or not. But that is just like you women! You can't even die comfortably, unless you have a fashionable winding-sheet to be wrapped in!"

"Men never study appearances—that is a fact well known," said Miss Marjorie, quietly. He laughed, and led her up the avenue.

The shutters of the house were closed, but through a crevice in one of the lower windows came a bright line of light, testifying to the presence of its occupants.

"Now for it! Look as dignified as you can, Marjorie," said Mr. Cowley—and rung the bell.

A light came rapidly through the hall. The door was opened, and a stout female, with a candle in her hand, peered doubtfully out into the night.

"Is it you, master?" she began. And then catching sight of the muffled figure of Marjorie, she gave a shrill yell of terror, and ran away.

"It's our old Queen Bess herself, and a tall black man with her!" they heard her scream—and then came a Babel of voices from the inner room.

"Shut the door!—lock it!—keep them out!" said one.

"I wish papa would come! It is too bad to leave us in such a place alone!" sighed another.

"But some one is really at the door!" said a third.
 "It is all nonsense about Queen Bess; I am going to see what they want."

"Oh, don't, Rose!" cried her mother and sister.

"Indeed, Miss Rose, it is Queen Bess as natural as life!" put in Mrs. Maloney.

"Nonsense!" replied Rose; and taking the candle, she went out to the door with a firm step.

"Who is it, and what do you want?" she asked, quietly.

Mr. Cowley stepped in, and let the light shine full upon his face.

"Don't you know me, Rose?"

"Why, Charles—Cousin Charles, can it be you?"

"It is really me."

"But I thought you were in Australia."

"So I was till a few weeks ago. Don't be alarmed, Rose; I am no ghost, but solid flesh and blood. And here is some one else, for whom I must crave a welcome—my wife, Rose, whom your servant mistook for the apparition of Queen Elizabeth."

Rose stared, as well she might, when he drew Miss Marjorie in beside him. But Cousin Charles was her great favorite, and she had faith in everything he did—in everybody he loved. So she held out her hand to the bonnetless stranger, with a pleasant smile, and then led the way into the drawing-room.

"Mamma, you will never guess who has come!" she exclaimed, "Cousin Charles Cowley, from Australia, and his wife!"

Greatly bewildered, Mrs. Cowley came forward to welcome her guests. She had the wildest notions about the manners and customs of foreign countries; and seeing a tall, stately lady with a plaid cloak doing duty for head and shoulders, as bonnet and shawl, she instantly fancied that it must be the native costume of the land from which she came—the *ne plus ultra* of elegance and grace among the ladies of Melbourne and Port Philip. It was good to see Mr. Cowley's face as the consciousness of her mistake dawned upon him by degrees.

"Dear me! Charles from Australia and his wife! My dear, you are most welcome. Will you lay aside your—" She was at a loss how to designate the article of dress, but finally hit upon the word "burnous," as being most suitable to the purpose. "Will you take off your burnous, my dear?"

At that, Mr. Cowley burst out laughing.

"My dear aunt, it is not a burnous, but an old plaid cloak!" he exclaimed. "And my wife never saw Australia in her life. She has been living in this neighborhood for more than a year, and I found her but by the merest chance in the world, to-night, and immediately ran away with her!"

Every face, even Mrs. Maloney's, expressed the most intense interest and curiosity.

"If you will sit down, I will tell you the story in a few words," he observed; and within five minutes he was the center of a most cosy looking circle, with Miss Marjorie upon his right hand, and Rose upon his left.

"You must know that my Marjorie is an orphan," he began. "I met her first at a house in London, where, among the gayest of parties, her little pale, sad face caught my eye, and, without my knowing it, won my heart. It was her uncle's house, but she was not happy there. Her cousins tyrannized over her—her aunt snubbed her—and I soon found that her uncle and myself were almost the only friends she had in the world. No doubt, I twisted this fact to my own purpose. I own candidly that I rejoiced when others were rude to her, so that she might see that I was kind. I won her, I do believe, more because she was grateful to me, than because she loved me; but the love came afterward, so that it did not matter. I won her, and I made her my wife, in spite of the sneers of her cousins, and the discouraging coldness of her aunt.

"For a time, we were very happy. Then some unknown correspondent began to trouble my peace. Anonymous letters came to me day after day, which told me that my wife was not what she seemed—that she loved another—that she only waited her time to play me false.

"I was foolish enough to read the slanders—to think of them—at last, to believe them. Circum-

stances, which looked suspicious then, but which I have seen by a far clearer light since, came up one after another, to make me distrust Marjorie still more. At last I felt so convinced of her faithlessness that I deserted her.

"I left a letter, saying why I had gone. I left her money, and I have never seen her face from that day, till to-night it beamed upon me out of the darkness like an accusing spirit. Aunt—Rose—she has been a school-teacher, a governess, a companion, during my absence. But she is one of the best and purest women on earth; and I took her away just as she was, from her drudgery, to come and tell you so. I am sure you will all befriend her. Will you not?"

"Every one of us!" was the hearty reply; and Mrs. Cowley folded the young wife in a motherly embrace, and Rose and Catharine kissed her on the cheek in the most sisterly fashion. Tears stood in Marjorie's dark eyes as they did so; and her husband turned away his head for a moment, as if ashamed of the weakness which he could not help feeling and showing at their kindness.

"What the good lady who employs her will say to her elopement, I cannot conjecture," remarked Mr. Cowley, after a moment's pause.

"Oh! she never had a very good opinion of me!" said Marjorie, cheerfully. "And she will probably utter a devout thanksgiving when she finds that she is to see me no more. There was never much love lost between us, I am afraid."

"Was she a nice person?" asked Catharine.

"Not according to my definition of the word nice. I can describe her to you in a very short time. She is a stout woman who thinks herself ill when she is only lazy, and who never gets out of her easy-chair except to go to bed or to fly into a rage—which she does, on an average, ten or twelve times a day. No—decidedly I do not call Mrs. Magnum a nice person."

"I should think not!" said Rose, laughing. "I wish I could see her face when she hears you are gone!"

"Never mind Mrs. Magnum now," said Mr. Cowley. "I want to hear something about my uncle and this mad freak of his. What could have put it into his head to take a haunted house?"

"Ah!" said Catharine, ruefully, "you must ask Rose that."

"Why?"

"Because she was at the bottom of it all!"

"Is that so, Rose?"

"I am afraid I must plead guilty, Charles. I thought it would be so nice and romantic to live with a ghost. But I don't like it at all. There is a dreadful cradle-rocking in the kitchen every night, and not one of us dares to stop there a moment after dusk. Papa heard it the first night we came, and yet he won't go away. I think he is a little frightened, but he fancies that people will laugh at him if he goes away. And so—"

"And so it will go on till we are carried off bodily by those horrible cradle-rocking creatures, and then your father will be satisfied!" broke in Mrs. Cowley, more in sorrow than in anger.

Her nephew burst out laughing.

"Ah! you may laugh, Charles; but I can assure you it is no joke to live in a place that gives you the cold shivers every time you stop to think what it really is. And Mr. Cowley actually talks of spending his Christmas here! But nothing shall tempt me to stay, even if he does. At any other time I can stand it; but I will not eat turkey and plum-pudding in company with half a dozen grown-up hobgoblins, to please any man alive."

"You are quite right, aunt. But I was not laughing at your troubles, only at your funny way of telling them. But, joking apart, what is this story about a cradle? Because I have heard something in Australia, which I think relates to this house."

"In Australia? Why, how could any one know of it there?" asked Rose, opening her eyes very wide.

"Who owns this house?"

"A Mr. Vernon."

"Do you know what his first name is?"

"Alfred," said Mrs. Cowley.

Her nephew looked perplexed for a moment, then his face cleared again.

"Oh, I see! George was the brother. How long is it since they have lived in the house—the Vernons, I mean?"

"Oh, a great many years! Twenty, or twenty-two, I think."

"That makes the story clear. You must know that I met a Mr. George Vernon in Australia—a man about forty years old. He drank to excess, and gambled desperately; and, in fact, there were a good many queer stories told of him in one way and another."

"One night, he was in my tent, with several of my friends, and the conversation turned upon the reality of ghosts, and the amount of credulity required to believe in them. Vernon said little at first; but, later in the evening, he suddenly looked up at me, and exclaimed:

"It is all true, every word of it. They do come back. I have seen and heard them, too, by day and night, for twenty years. They can come in any shape. They can turn their hands to anything. Why, I have known one rock a cradle for four-and-twenty hours, without ceasing, and sing all the while into the bargain!"

"What a useful ghost to have in the house with a small family!" said some one, laughing.

"I never saw any one turn so pale as Vernon did."

"Useful! You would not crack your jokes about them if you stayed a night alone at my old house at Banley," he exclaimed. "Gad! What with the butler's pantry, and the turret-room, it's little like laughing you'd feel by morning, I'm thinking! Pass me the brandy, and let me get it out of my head."

"And sure enough he did get it out of his head; for it took two men to see him safe home when he left my tent at ten o'clock that night."

"And what do you infer from that, Charles?" asked his wife.

"Why, my dear, this is near Banley, and the only house that I have ever heard of where a cradle rocks. To make assurance doubly sure, Mr. Vernon's brother owns the place now. I would be willing to take my oath that the rocking of the cradle has something to do with one of those men; but which of the two I am not prepared to say."

"I say George," exclaimed Rose, who had been deeply interested in the story.

"And I should like to hear the cradle," remarked Mr. Cowley.

"Oh, don't think of such a thing! It is too horrible!" exclaimed both the girls.

"I only want to convince myself that it does rock."

"But we all heard it."

"Then I confess that I am like the young lady whose grandmother told her that she had found out by her own experience that love-making was very dangerous work. I want to find out by my own experience, too. Where is this cradle?"

"In the kitchen."

"Does it rock every night?"

"Yes."

"At what time?"

"It begins about nine."

"And it now wants a quarter to ten. It must be in full swing by this time. Rose, will you do the honors of the ghost to your old friend?"

"Not I!"

"Catharine?"

"I must beg to be excused."

"Well, aunt, you will come?"

"No, Charles; I will never set my foot in that dreadful kitchen again, by day or night, while I have my right senses."

"Then I am sure that good servant of yours—"

Mrs. Maloney shrieked a quick denial before he had time to finish the sentence, and Rose laughed.

"You will find her the greatest coward of us all," she observed. "But if you really want to hear the horrid sound, open the door."

He did so. Every one was silent; and through the hall came plainly enough the rocking of the cradle, and the low sound of the mother's song.

Mr. Cowley stood a moment at the door, then shut it, and came back to the fireside, looking a little pale.

"I wonder if it is a hoax?" he observed, after a short pause.

"That can hardly be. For we all saw the room the first night we came, and there was no one there, though the cradle rocked all the time. Is it not horrible to have to live in the house with it?"

"Indeed it is; and I question if it is right for you to do so. You must make my uncle go as soon as you can."

"I am sure that is easier said than done," sighed Mrs. Cowley.

"I know what I would do," observed Marjorie.

"What, my love?"

"Frighten him."

"But the cradle has failed to do that."

"Then I would give him something worse than the cradle. If hearing things will not scare him, I should be inclined to try what seeing things will do."

Rose clapped her hands delightedly.

"I have it, Cousin Charles. If you and Marjorie will help me, we can manage it easily."

"How?"

"You must be ghosts."

"What nonsense you do talk, Rose!" said Catharine.

"It is not nonsense. If you or I undertake to play the part, papa would see through it at once, because he would miss us. But he knows nothing of Charles's, return, and has never seen Marjorie. They would both make capital ghosts."

"There is something in it," observed Mr. Cowley.

"And if you will leave it to us, we will make my uncle very willing to go. But you must stow us out of sight before he comes."

"The turret-chamber is ready, and a fire is lit there," said Mrs. Cowley. "But that is the room that is said to be haunted."

"Oh, never mind! But what knock is that?"

"Good gracious! it is Mr. Cowley. Run, Rose! get your cousins up into the room before we let him in. Here, take the cloak, or he will be sure to see it. We will send you up some supper, Charles. Rose shall come; but, for mercy's sake, be quick now!"

With much suppressed laughter and merriment, the two ghosts were got out of the way, and were safe in the turret-room long before Mrs. Maloney had let in her master, who was fuming violently over what he termed her "stupid Irish delay."

CHAPTER IX.

Mrs. Cowley looked exceedingly guilty when her lord and master entered; but he, being full of his own business, did not observe it. He laid aside his wrappings, called for hot water and the spirit-case, and sat down by the fire, with the air of a man who had earned his repose, and meant thoroughly to enjoy it.

"Have you have been alarmed in any way since I went, Mrs. Cowley?" he asked, when his toddy was thoroughly mixed.

"No, my dear," she replied briskly; which was a gross fib, as we well know, because the unexpected arrival of her nephew and his wife had nearly sent her into a fit of hysterics. But that was only one of the white lies that are perfectly allowable, and even praiseworthy, when the head of the household is in question. If British matrons hesitated long over a "taradiddle," there would be little peace, I fear, in many a British home.

"Not alarmed, eh?" said Mr. Cowley, sipping at

his glass. "Well, I am glad you are getting brave. I have been to see the agent, and there is no reason why we should not rent the house for another year. Mr. Vernon will not want it, and the agent evidently looks upon it as one of the best speculations he ever made."

"Another year! Mercy preserve us!" said Mrs. Cowley, holding up her hands in horror.

"And why not, pray?" was the sharp reply. "If we go sooner, we shall have done no good. People will think we are frightened away, after all; whereas, if we stay for fifteen or sixteen months, they cannot have the face to hint at such a thing."

Mrs. Cowley groaned.

"Don't you see? While the men are at work, I'll make them take up the floor of that pantry. Depend on it, there is nothing here but rats."

"Can rats rock a cradle, Mr. Cowley?" asked his better half, severely.

"I dare say they could if they tried."

"And sing?"

"There are plenty of singing mice in the world; perhaps ours belong to that breed, my dear. However, what I mean to say is this: that the house being old, is in all probability swarming with the brutes; and that, in some of their antics in the pantry, they contrive to imitate the rocking of a cradle, and to make a sound which will pass muster as a human voice. So I'll have the floor up, and we'll put a stop to their fun at once."

"It was a human voice!" said Mrs. Cowley, indignantly. "The idea of trying to explain it in that way! I never heard of anything so absurd in all my life! Did the agent offer you any refreshment, my dear?"

Mr. Cowley wagged his head good-humoredly.

"I see what you are driving at; but I was never more sober in my life, Mrs. Cowley. And we'll have the floor up to-morrow, and you shall see if, during the rest of the year, we hear anything more of the cradle."

Mrs. Cowley held her peace. Experience had taught her that argument, in a case like this, would be of no use. But if in her heart she had harbored any little secret scruple as to the propriety of the plan by which the young people intended to dislodge her lord and master from the strange home he had chosen, it vanished from that hour, and she stood as deeply committed to the ghost-scheme as any one among them all.

"Where is Rose?" asked Mr. Cowley, looking up suddenly.

Mrs. Cowley blushed up to her eyes. "She—she is up-stairs, I think. Do you want her?"

"Yes; I have brought her a book. As she is so very fond of ghost-stories, I bought her the most horrible thing that I could find in that way. It will serve to pass away her evenings very pleasantly this winter."

At that moment Rose entered, looking peculiarly well satisfied with herself, and everything in general.

"A book for me, papa? Now that is kind!"

Mr. Cowley grinned to himself over his toddy.

"You'll be charmed with it. There's a picture on the first page, enough to turn any one's hair white."

"I'll look at it directly," said Rose, laying it down upon the table. "But, papa, how could you leave us so long alone this evening? That cradle has been rocking so dreadfully all the time!"

"Rats, my dear. Nothing in the world but rats."

"I wonder, now, what you would do if you saw a ghost, papa—a real ghost!"

"What I told you once before—I would pinch its nose with the tongs."

"I should like to see you tried!"

"Bah! it is all nonsense, my dear. Ghosts are an exploded theory. For my part, I have so little faith in them, that I would not in the least mind staying here in this old house by myself all night long."

As he spoke, the hall-clock struck twelve, and Rose gave her mother a peculiar glance.

"Oh, how dreadful! This is just the time when

ghosts begin their rounds. Do let us all go to bed, or we shall be sure to see one."

"Yes, let us go to bed at once," said Mrs. Cowley, rising from her chair.

As a matter of course, their end was gained, for Mr. Cowley was seized with a fit of obstinacy upon the spot. They knew well that nothing would induce him to stir from the spot till he had finished his gin and water, and smoked his cigar.

"Go to bed, all of you," he said benignantly. "I'm not afraid to stop here by myself, and I shall come up before you are fairly asleep."

Mrs. Cowley and her two daughters left the room. The bright face of Rose was sparkling with mischief and laughter; and the instant the door shut behind her, she caught her mother's hand, and whispered joyously: "Mamma, you need be under no concern. He will not want to stop here long after to-night. You never saw two such horrible objects as Charles and Marjorie have made themselves, with my help and Mrs. Macarthy's. Come and see them, before you go into your own room to wait for him."

Mrs. Cowley and Catharine followed her into the turret-chamber. Though they had been warned to expect a ghostly sight, neither of them could help starting and well-nigh crying out, when they saw the figures that stood in the center of the room.

One was a nun, dressed in the flowing black robes of a Sister of Mercy, with her hands bound tightly together, and clasped above her breast. Her face was white as death—and from the right temple, a deep crimson stain ran down toward the chin. The contrast between the pallor of her face, and the bright blood-stain was ghastly in the extreme. On her left hand stood a stalwart black man, clad in flowing robes of the purest white. Mrs. Cowley's best dressing-gown had been pressed into this service, and about his swarthy brow was folded a turban consisting of certain yards of India muslin, on which she set great store. In his hand he held a rusted dagger, which Rose had hunted up in some of her exploring-tours through the house. His height seemed almost terrific—a circumstance soon explained when he showed the false soles and heels he had managed to affix to his boots. His air was stern and menacing; and, altogether, the pair were by no means the most pleasant visitants that could be imagined, to a gentleman sitting alone over his toddy in a haunted house.

"Shall we do, aunt?" exclaimed Mr. Cowley, as she entered.

"Do? You are perfectly dreadful! Who dressed you like that?"

"Rose."

"And where on earth could she have got such dreadful ideas from? You never saw a ghost, child?"

"No, mamma; but I have read about them often enough; and papa says book-knowledge is not the slightest use to us unless we can apply it to something in real life. I hope he will be much pleased with my application to-night."

"You are a saucy girl, Rose," said her mother, still eying the apparitions with some apprehension. "I wonder, now, what he will say to you? If it was me, I should go into a fit the moment you opened the door."

"My uncle is made of sterner stuff. Still, I hope we shall give him a start. One don't want to take all this trouble in dressing for nothing."

"Shall you go down to him or let him meet you on the stairs?" asked Catharine.

"Oh, we will go down; we shall be seen to so much more advantage in a room."

"Besides, he has threatened to pinch your noses with the tongs, and he cannot do that if he is on the staircase when he sees you," added Rose.

"That is a consideration," replied Mr. Cowley. "Now, will you ladies betake yourselves to bed? It is nearly half-past twelve—the very hour two orthodox ghosts would be most likely to set out upon their

travels. Good night, aunt; we will send him up to you in a very short space of time."

The ladies retreated. Mrs. Cowley, in order that she might not be suspected of any complicity in the plot, if by any means it should be discovered, undressed and retired to bed as usual. But Rose and Catharine sat down beside their chamber-door, and waited the result of their operations with the greatest impatience.

Meanwhile, Mr. Cowley, sitting over his cigar below, little dreamed how his nearest and dearest were conspiring ruthlessly against his peace of mind. The ghostly cradle was silent at last; his cigar was a fine one, and his toddy was grateful to the taste. Sitting there, monarch of all he surveyed, he thought over the events of his visit to the agent, and the promise which he had drawn from him about the drains.

"A clever dodge, that!" he mused, approvingly, to himself. Nothing can be easier than to set the men at work among the pipes in the cellar, and so take them on till they are under the pantry, and be hanged to it. I'll stop that noise, or my name isn't Cowley! People shall not have it to say that, after laughing at every one else for their belief in ghosts. I went to get frightened at one myself. Ghosts, indeed! Suppose there actually is one about the premises; of course the poor thing cannot rest in his grave till something which he's forgot, or omitted to do on earth has been done for him. Very well! What could be easier than to say to the troubled spirit:—"Make yourself quite easy; I will attend to it at once? Don't stay out of your grave a moment longer, for fear that you should take cold, my dear sir!" Of course, any sensible ghost, being addressed in such a sensible manner, would immediately return to his grave, and stay there. That is what I call a common-sense kind of dealing with the citizens of another world. They would appreciate it—I am sure they would—Oh Lord! what's that?"

He might well ask the question; for his flow of self-congratulation was suddenly checked by a low, hollow groan, outside the door. He listened intently. The groan came again, but louder than before.

"There is a noise! I'm not dreaming!" he mused, while his hair stood on his head, "like quills upon the fretful porcupine." "What on earth can it be? Mrs. Macarthy walking in her sleep, I suppose!" he said, with trembling lips, and a face white with the fear he was ashamed of, but which he could not control.

The door swung open—a gigantic black man entered, leading by the hand a bleeding nun!

Mr. Cowley's jaw dropped. His face would have been a study for a painter, as he gazed at his unearthly visitants, with his hands resting upon his knees.

He had threatened such visitors with the tongs, it is true; but pinching their noses was the thing furthest from his thoughts at that moment.

With his heart beating almost to suffocation, he watched their movements. He longed to speak, but the words died upon his lips, and his throat felt parched and hot.

Slowly they advanced toward his chair—the nun's sad eyes fixed silently on his face—the outstretched hand of the black man pointing toward his heart.

He bore it manfully for a moment; but nearer, still nearer, they came—the hand almost touched his shoulder.

It was too much for poor flesh and blood to bear.

He gave a sort of stifled cry—threw himself back in his chair—evaded the shadowy grasp and dashed headlong from the room.

Up the dark stairs he flew, and finding his own door rather by instinct than by sight, he blundered in upsetting two chairs, and startling Mrs. Cowley from what was apparently her first and sweetest nap.

"What is the matter, my dear?" she said, sitting up in bed and rubbing her eyes. "Have you hurt yourself?"

"Oh, don't talk to me!" groaned Mr. Cowley. "Not one ghost have I seen, but two and we'll get out of this infernal place to-morrow!"

Rose and Catharine hearing this in their own bedroom, had a hearty laugh, and then went after the two ghosts, who were putting out the candles down below, and making themselves in many ways extremely useful.

Before the clock struck one, all the house was still—each inmate wrapped in a sound and peaceful sleep, including Mr. Cowley, who had recovered a little from his fright, and was troubled by no black man or murdered nun in his dreams.

CHAPTER X.

FROM that fatal evening a new life began for Mr. Cowley. He was no longer "monarch of all he surveyed;" for in every darkened room, in every obscure corner of the haunted house, lurked something unseen and unheard by others, but full of mysterious life and motion for him. If a mouse squeaked behind the wainscot, it would send him scurrying along the passage at the rate of ten miles an hour; if a door shut suddenly, it made him tremble and turn pale; if a light shone in a window, if a board creaked unexpectedly beneath his feet, he was apt to start, and exclaim, "Lord bless me!" in a tone that did Mrs. Cowley's very heart good. In one word, the worthy banker, from a snug, good-tempered denizen of Mecklenburgh square, had become transformed into that strangest of animals, a haunted man! His sleep was no longer peaceful, for he was perpetually dreading a ghostly visit; while Mrs. Cowley snored placidly and provokingly at his side. His coffee lost its relish, his tea its flavor; and his nightly glass of Hollands and water was taken more to screw his courage up to the sticking point, than for any actual pleasure it gave him, in the peculiar and unwonted state of his mind.

He was horribly frightened. He hated that house with a shivering hatred; he told himself that if he saw another actual apparition there something dreadful would happen to him; he would have a fit—an apoplectic one, very possibly—or perhaps a stroke of palsy, which would leave him with his face awry! It was a horrible thought; but he kept it manfully to himself. He would have suffered those slow tortures of agonized fear a hundred times over, rather than own to the wife of his bosom that he had erred in selecting such a place for his residence. He might have said as much to some gentleman-friend, if one had chanced to come in his way; but to his wife—never! That was a concession too great by far for the worthy Englishman to make. No; the husband, like the king, could do no wrong; and he was determined to uphold that doctrine to the last gasp in his own family-circle.

Do you think that same circle, meanwhile, was unaware of his struggles—unconscious of his fear? Not a bit of it! Mrs. Cowley, as she awoke each morning from a refreshing sleep, and saw him lying pale and uneasy upon his pillow, smiled grimly to herself, and wondered how long he would take to come to his senses again. His daughters, too, were rejoicing in the pangs their own mischievous arts had caused, even when they asked after "poor papa's headache" in such mellifluous tones each morning at the breakfast-table. And Mrs. Macarthy—deceitful old sinner that she was!—laughed till she cried sometimes, over the broths and jellies which she made each day, and which she pressed upon his acceptance with a face as long as an undertaker's.

The whole house was in league against him, and the poor wretch knew it not. Yet he stood it out manfully; and there seemed some danger that between his uneasiness and his obstinacy, he would grow seriously ill. Besides, Christmas was fast approaching, and the girls, wanted to dance the New Year in and the Old Year out, at their own house in Mecklenburgh Square. What was to be done with the banker to make him strike his colors, desert his ship, and own himself soundly beaten?

It was Rose who formed a fresh plan, which she thought might be successful. She proposed it that evening when the conspirators met, as usual, in the turret chamber, to hatch new plots against the peace of the master of the house. But first, Mrs. Cowley had somewhat to say.

"I'm afraid we shall have to give it up as a bad job," she remarked, shaking her head dolefully.

"Why, mamma?" asked Catharine.

"Your father will never own he is afraid, my dear; and I can see that we are killing him by inches. He is getting so thin; and really, he does not eat enough to keep a sparrow alive. If we should worry him into a fever or a consumption, I should never forgive myself."

"No fear of that, aunt, while his obstinacy lasts," replied her nephew, cheerfully. "But I wish to goodness he would get frightened, and give us a chance of seeing a little more of this round world than we can expect to see while we are cooped up here. For my part, I feel as if I were a kind of iron mask. You ought to make me a handsome present for undergoing the imprisonment, aunt."

"So I will, my dear, if it ever comes to an end."

"There's the worst of it."

"I wonder if he suspects," said Marjorie.

"My love, how should he?"

"True! If he were a woman, now, I should feel sure that he had discovered our secret. Being a man, I suppose there is not much fear."

"Well," said Rose, complacently, "I think I can set you all free."

"How?"

"By inventing a new ghost, which I shall patent." They all laughed.

"You see he cares little for the cradle now. In fact, I think we are all getting used to it. But if you only do as I tell you—we will bring this old room into use—and take the letter and the lock of hair we found here, and scare him so he will be ready and willing to go out of the house the very next day."

Rose then entered into all the details of her plan, which was pronounced an excellent one by everybody present. In obedience to her instructions, Catharine had a toothache and Mrs. Cowley a headache the next evening, which forbade their sitting up later than nine o'clock. Mrs. Macarthy and Rose also retired at that early hour, to wait upon the invalids, and Mr. Cowley was left alone in his glory, without even a cat to bear him company. He did not object to the solitude, however. He mixed himself some capital grog, smoked one or two cheroots, and finally took up a book to keep himself awake. It was a volume of American tales, and this was the story which, by ill-luck, he happened to select.

"While I lay one night in the first distempered visions of my illness, I heard those who watched beside me telling an old tale of a family long since extinct in our settlement.

"An old and wealthy man had won a fair young girl for his bride, and brought her from her native England to this distant country, that he might separate her forever from an early lover, a cousin to whom her hand had once been pledged, and—so said the gossips—her heart always given.

"Gold is no less powerful in the mother-country than in this; and for its sake the father of the lovely Ginevra took back his pledged word, and gave his daughter to a stern and moody man, who little knew how to value the prize he had gained.

"So for America he sailed, and built a stately home for his pale bride, on the very place where our quiet village now stands.

"Nothing was spared that taste could dictate or lavish wealth supply. But luxury was not what the Lady Ginevra desired while love was offered to her. Swiftly as they had sailed across the bright blue sea, one followed close upon their track; and Reginald, the deserted lover, soon found his lady fair's retreat.

"Beautiful she was, but frail. And forgetting all womanly honor and duty, she fled from her beautiful home, and from him who had given it to her.

The injured husband discovered her treachery too late; for their horses' hoofs were spurning the pavements of the outer court before he left his room; and when he hurried down the stairs, and to the open hall-door, an iron glaive lay there, defying him to the last. At this sight his strong heart gave way, and the pitying servants bore him back to his room a raving maniac. For three long years they watched him—in the fourth he needed not their care, but was at rest. Of the lost lady no tidings were ever received; and as years went by, and the old Hall began to decay, some enterprising settlers tore it down, and from its ruins, phoenix-like, sprung up our pretty village of brighter days.

"This, or something akin to it, was the tale I heard, and in all my feverish visions after that night, the English lady bore a conspicuous part. They tell me that I called for her incessantly: that I fancied myself, now, the successful lover, and now the forsaken husband; and could only be pacified by the assurance of her speedy return.

"Be this as it may, I can remember well how often I saw her standing by my bedside—an airy, impalpable shape, of which I could only discover a single feature; but all seemed a glittering array of misty loveliness. And when, in a voice I could understand (though on the duller ears of my attendants it fell like the whisperings of the evening wind), she bade me seek her at the Hall, how could I disobey? I only watched my opportunity, and counterfeiting sleep, one hot summer afternoon, saw them all leave the room with noiseless steps, and knew that I was free.

"The glass door at the lower end of my apartment led into the garden. From that, the lonely road that led over the hill, and the site of the Hall was easily gained. I drew my dressing-gown around me, thrust my feet into a pair of embroidered slippers, and passed out.

"Oh, the glad thrill that shot through my veins at the first free breath of the summer air! Oh, the delight with which my parched lips quaffed the clear water in the fountain by the arbor! I spilled it over me in my feverish haste! I threw it over my hot face, and over my closely-shorn head! Then, unfastening the little wooden gate, I ran swiftly, longing but not daring to shout aloud in my joy, till the lonely hill-road was gained.

"I climbed the hills and descended the valleys—I waded through the morass, not without a sickening fear when I saw the brown and black water-snakes glide lovingly in pairs around me.

"At length, I stood upon the brow of the last hill, and saw what I had not before discovered—that a precipice lay at my feet, jagged and rough enough, it is true, to admit of a careful descent, but still a fearful thing to look at and attempt. Other way, however, there was none; and, holding my breath and uttering an inward prayer to God, I began the descent. Slowly and steadily I went on. I was within ten feet of the bottom. I looked back at the height I had descended, and, with a gay laugh, grasped at a bough which grew near, and swung myself from the rock on which I stood.

"But I was prematurely exultant. The shrub to which I had intrusted my life and safety, though seemingly strong, was in reality decayed and but slightly rooted. I felt it grinding up from the ground, and knew that in another moment I should fall below. I clutched frantically with my free hand. I shrieked aloud in frenzy and despair when I found I could not hold my precarious footing. I looked beneath me at the rocky bed of the brook, and thought how soon I should be upon it, stunned and motionless—it might be, dead! The shrub broke in my hand—I was gone!

"But at the moment of my fall, terror gave me strength, and with a tremendous muscular effort, I threw my body from the bank in a frantic leap for life.

"My presence of mind probably saved me; for, in the place of falling directly below, and upon the

rocks, the impetus of my leap sent me far out into the stream, where a bed of soft sand received me, and the cool water, too shallow to engulf, rippled around me in separate streams.

"How long I lay there, I cannot tell; but when at last I unclosed my eyes, and looked up at the calm blue sky, that seemed to bend close above me, the hot sun, though veiled behind a pavilion of fleecy clouds, dazzled my eyes and burned my cheek.

"I rose, pale, and weak, and trembling, and gained the shore. Striking inland, the old Hall was just before me. I walked slowly up the long avenue, and ascended the granite steps. As I reached the last step, I stumbled and fell upon my knee. Looking round to see the cause, I found an iron gauntlet, rusted and eaten away, and half buried in the moss that grew around it. I took it up with a strange thrill of awe. How many years had it awaited me, since the fiery over hurled it, like a curse, back in the face of his pursuer? The door before me was of carved oak, but worm-eaten and decayed. With a sudden impulse, for which I could not account, I struck upon it furiously with the iron glove. The frail fastenings, already half undone by the hand of Time, gave way at my impetuous summons, and, amid a thousand echoes, the door swung slowly on its hinges, and the castle was won. When the cloud of dust raised by my sudden entrance had subsided, I passed through the portal, and stood upon the floor of the hall. There, where the lovely lady's flying footsteps had rested last; there, where the lover had thrown down the iron glove, in defiance of the wronged and deserted husband; there, where the feeble old man had sunk down in agony, when, hearing their horses' hoofs beyond the outer court, he learned the full extent of his dishonor and despair; there, where his menials had raised him, shrieking and cursing in impetuous madness; there, where they had borne him slowly up the long stone staircase, that wound around and around, and far above my head, to the lonely room that was to be his prison and his tomb. The stone flags were no longer leaning shoulder and shoulder, like firm friends and true. Time had come between them, as between all other things; and the dark and deep crevices on every side were only hidden by the long grass that sought to bridge them over.

"While I stood in the hall, I thought I heard a faint, distant noise above my head, and looking up the staircase, I saw—"

"Yow!" yelled Mr. Cowley, flinging the book to the other end of the room. "I'll read no more of that. I've got to where the ghost comes in. 'I looked up, and saw—' Oh yes, of course you did. But if you imagine you are going to induce me to read your raw-head-and-bloody-bone rubbish, you are grandly mistaken. Strange that everything one takes up in this wretched place turns into a ghost-story on your hands! I should not be surprised any morning to find the leading article in the *Times* turning into a tale of a haunted house right under my eyes. It's unbearable—positively unbearable!" He finished his grog, looked at his watch, and raked out the fire.

"Eleven o'clock, and the house is still as death! I wonder if they are all asleep? High time for me to go to— Oh, Lord! what's that?"

The sound was in the room exactly overhead—a steady, continuous knocking, that seemed to summon him to the place without delay.

"What room is that? The turret-chamber! Rose said there was something there, and that was why she moved her room!"

For a moment or two the worthy banker sat like one paralyzed, a cold moisture on his face, and his heart beating a muffled march within his breast. At last his "British pluck" came to his aid.

"By St. George of England, I won't turn coward in my old age!" he exclaimed. "Man, woman or ghost!—let it be what it may, I'll go and meet it!"

He took the candle and left the room. All was

quiet on the stairs, in the hall, in the gallery above. The knocking ceased.

With a trembling hand he opened the door of the turret-chamber.

A tall and slender woman stood in the center of the room. Her face was hidden by a black mask. A full mantle, or robe, of crimson cloth covered her from head to foot. It was girded at the waist by a cord of variegated silk, and the full sleeves were embroidered with threads of gold. Upon her breast something shone and sparkled in the shape of a star.

In one hand she held the casket and the tress of hair; in the other, a paper, on which the astonished banker saw written in large words:

"On that day, I and a child of three years had lain speechless and senseless for more than twelve hours. The strange and sudden illness terrified every one around me—they thought me dead, and a veritable resurrection from the tomb could hardly have created more excitement than my recovery. I remembered the recovery perfectly, but all before it was a blank. Now, however, as I stood gazing on that picture, I seemed to remember dimly some other stage of existence, some lost life in which I had loved and suffered as I had never loved or suffered in this. It was the old mystery that has puzzled so many minds, far stronger than mine—the mystery that we shall all, perhaps, see one day, was but the dim working of a veiled and hidden truth."

Mr. Cowley read these words with an air of the utmost perplexity. His terror was gone, for he believed the mysterious lady to be human and living like himself. But what she wanted of him—why she held that paper out so persistently, and what on earth its contents were all about, he could not say.

"Bless me! what a rigmarole it all is, to be sure!" he muttered to himself. "How on earth did she get here? and what can she want? I wonder if she can speak English? I'll try her, at all events. Ma'am, can I be of any service to you?"

The figure turned. The very movement struck a chill to the worthy banker's heart. What if she were not alive, after all? Gracious powers! what if he had been calling a ghost "Ma'am!"

The figure moved. It made no noise, and yet it came nearer and nearer. He put out his hand to arrest its progress, an ice-cold touch met his own. He turned faint and sick. He would have fled, but his feet seemed rooted to the floor.

"Go—go from the house, and bring my husband back!" said a hollow voice; then the black veil fell aside, and a white, hideous face glared upon him. He uttered a loud shriek and fainted.

The next instant, Mrs. Cowley, Rose, and Catharine were in the room, and Cousin Charles stole out of the cupboard, where he had witnessed the scene.

"I hope he is not hurt," whispered Mrs. Cowley. "I shall never forgive myself for the trick if he comes to harm."

"Make yourself easy, aunt, he is recovering," said Mr. Cowley; and, snatching his uncle up in his strong arms, he laid him upon his own bed, and vanished before the banker had seen him.

There was not much danger, after that, of Mr. Cowley's remaining in the haunted house a day longer than he could help.

CHAPTER XI.

It is strange how intimately scenery becomes connected with some of the strongest emotions and passions of the human mind. We gaze out upon a fair and sunny landscape in midsummer, as we lie beneath the trees, and a vague sadness steals over us, because the eyes whose beauty has sunk into our hearts cannot look upon it too; we look up at the moon as she floats serenely through the deep blue sky, and sigh, thinking of the days that are no more. Nay, even the storms, that roar loudly over land and sea, set us brooding over the memories of the past, and our tears fall with the rain.

So thought Rose Cowley, as she sat alone in her

dressings-room one gloomy morning. Poor Rose! she had been washed in many a shower of tears, in spite of all her present gayety.

Her father would as soon have believed that Gog and Magog could come down from their pedestals and fall in love as that his merry Rose had fallen a victim to the little urchin with the bow. Yet it was true. A year after she had left school, she had paid a visit to one of her mother's relatives—a genuine, old-fashioned, hearty, English squire. It was at his house that the mischief was done—under his protection that she met the man who was to be at once the blessing and the torment of her future life. She had first seen him at church, where, I am afraid, his blue eyes, and regular features, and golden hair, had attracted more of attention than she gave to her prayer-book. And when, at the end of the service, her host came up to her and introduced the handsome stranger as the son of his oldest and dearest friend, there were not wanting those who marked the shy smile, the slight blush, and the bashful drooping of her eyes as she greeted him. Rose was a free, wild Rose no longer. Love, even at first sight, will always be lord of all; and there is no time on earth, I think, when he plays so many vagaries, as during the visit of a pretty city girl to an old-fashioned English country-girl.

Mr. Vere became a constant visitor at the house of his friend; and Rose entered upon a new phase of her life, and that sweetest, happiest and most foolish of times, when a young girl's heart first finds out that it has other work to do besides beating. She was absurdly happy, and ridiculously sentimental, as a matter of course. She would sit for hours, when her lover was absent, recalling every trivial circumstance of their last interview; and then, with a blush at the thought of her employment, welcome another idea, touching in its tenderness, to her heart, and weep for joy that she had reserved the first fond love of her young spirit for him.

In such musings—such happy companionship—a month passed rapidly away. No word of love had been spoken between the two; yet enough had been said (though something always seemed to check the avowal upon his lips) to leave her happy in the belief that she was very dear to him.

True, he had never asked her to be his—had never told her definitely that he loved her. But he had kissed her hand; and a lock of that beautiful golden hair rose and fell with every pulsation of her happy heart.

Alas for that first sweet, innocent joy. Ere long that sunny curl was wet with bitterest tears, and hidden carefully away—the first of the lost treasures, which she, like every other woman, was to gather around her as she went through life.

It was her own folly that first came between them. She was young and childish; perhaps vain and trifling, at times. She loved him dearly, and yet, secure in her possession, she was at times very cruel to him. For when a man loves a woman truly, she has it in her power to hurt and torture him in a thousand ways.

Rose took the heart that had been given her; and, half-carelessly, half-maliciously, wounded it grievously.

Among the guests at Howlet House was one who had been seriously inclined to worship at her shrine before Mr. Vere had ever made his appearance. That he loved her, she could not help believing; that he was unhappy about her, she and every one else around her knew. And yet she allowed him to hang over her chair—to talk to her—to bring her ices, to hold her bouquet when she danced, giving him encouragement (in the countless ways a woman knows so well) without seeming to do so.

Mr. Vere looked on and said nothing. She was not engaged to him, and he had no right to interfere. It may be that he might have asked for such a right; but in his heart he disapproved so strongly of her conduct that, he preferred to watch the drama

to its close before he committed himself in any way.

The crisis came at last. They were at a party one evening, this man and Rose. Mr. Vere was absent, but was expected later in the evening, a proceeding on his part which did not please his willful lady-love. But she would not show her displeasure. She listened to the passionate words that were breathed in her ear, and said to herself that she would not "wear the willow." Come what might with that thought, some chain that bound her spirit seemed suddenly unloosened, and she became the gayest of the gay. The band struck up a waltz—couple after couple glided easily away from the group around them, till she was the only lady left.

"One waltz—only one!" breathed that voice in her ear.

She shrunk back at first, well remembering in what terms Mr. Vere had expressed his opinion of the dance a few days before.

"Oh, I cannot!"

"Surely you are not afraid of Mr. Vere? He is not here—he will not know. Will you not grant this favor, perhaps the last I shall ever ask of you?"

The pleading glance of the sad, dark eyes prevailed. His arm was round her waist, his breath upon her cheek; his voice breathing words of passionate admiration in her not unwilling ear; and the absent lover seemed almost forgotten. People made a circle around the room, to watch them; for both were young, and graceful, and beautiful, and they moved as if they had but one soul between them. Rose's vanity was roused by the flattering exclamations she heard on every side. Flushed, and smiling, and happy, she floated round; when, as she passed the door, she looked up and saw a gentleman stand there with folded arms, and his eyes fixed intently upon her face.

It was Mr. Vere.

She was proud, too proud to show how frightened she was, though her partner felt her trembling from head to foot. She said that she was tired, and they left the circle and sat down.

Mr. Vere did not come to her. She saw him talking to a lady near the door, as grave and calm as ever, only that he never trusted himself to look that way till the party was breaking up. Then he crossed the room and stood before her.

"The carriage waits," he said, quietly. "Will you allow me?"

He offered his arm. He did not seem angry. No man could have been more courteous than he. He never spoke as they descended the stairs together; but at the carriage-door he stopped a moment and looked at her very gravely.

"Words cannot express the pain you have given me, to-night," he said; "but let it pass. You are free, and I have no right to reproach you. Good-by, and God bless you, Rose!"

He kissed her hand, but she snatched it away and sprung into the carriage. She felt annoyed and out of temper. When she reached home, she went up into her own room, and stood before the glass. It was a very fair face that she gazed at—he had often praised it, and she knew her power well.

"And he thinks I am going to beg and pray for forgiveness, does he?" she said, tossing her head willfully. "We shall see, after all, what great crime I have committed, that I need to tremble and shrink from his eye. To-morrow, I will not—to-morrow I will show him that if he chooses to play the part of a tyrant, I do not intend to take that of a serf. He had better fetter me at once."

In that mood she went to bed.

But ah! we should be very careful how we part with those we love, even though they only leave us for a few hours. Do they always come back? Or if they come, do we always know just how we shall meet them? It may be as utter strangers, for aught we can say. I have known those who loved each other dearly as they said good-by, and yet within

three months they stood face to face as coldly as if they had never met.

But the case of poor Rose was even worse than this, for Mr. Vere never came again.

She had preserved a discreet silence as to this episode in her history on her return. No one had ever heard her mention Mr. Vere's name—not one of her own family ever knew that such a person was in existence. Her woman's pride came to her aid. She learned to live without him—to be happy without him; yet he was not forgotten.

And on this morning, when she sat in her own room, thinking of the past, she held a letter in her hand from him. It had been forwarded with others from Mecklenburgh Square. The simple words set her heart beating, so that she could scarcely see:

"Rose, I was too hasty and harsh with you years ago. Time has taught me that there is nothing so precious as your love. If I have lost it, I am coming home to try and gain it again. God grant I may not be too late! Ever yours,
STANLEY VERE."

Coming home, and to win her? But how and when, and where?

CHAPTER XII.

WHEN and where, indeed? She could not hope for a meeting so romantic as that of her two cousins had been; and yet in what other way could her lover seek her presence?

For you must bear in mind that the parent-birds had no idea that their scarcely-fledged nestling had tried her wings in so bold a flight. Rose in love! Rose, who had scarcely given up playing with her doll! The thing was simply absurd!

So the young lady sat alone in her room, and stared at the letter, and wondered what on earth she should do, and wished she had a *confidante* who would give her some advice as to the best way of extracting herself from the dilemma. It would not do to speak to her mother, and Catharine would only laugh at her. At last she thought of Marjorie, who had a romance of her own, and therefore would know how to sympathize with another.

She went.

She found that lady alone in the turret chamber. Charles was smoking a cigar, in fear and trembling, in one of the empty attics, and at the same time getting a breath of fresh air. So Rose had her cousin all to herself, and told her tale without much loss of time. Marjorie listened silently.

"Well," she said, when Rose had finished, "the old fairy tale is true. The Princess Perfect may be shut up in the highest and most impregnable of towers, and guarded by the fiercest of dragons, yet, in one way or another, Prince Imperfect will continue to get up the stair, and fall at her feet all the same. It is curious, and, at the same time, very edifying!"

"But I am not Princess Perfect," said Rose.

"True."

"Nor was I shut up in a tower."

"If you had been it would not have mattered. But never mind that—do you want to see the prince?"

"Ah, yes!"

"That is frank, and to the purpose. Why did you let him go?"

"He thought I flirted, my dear," said Rose, firmly.

"Oh, indeed!" replied Marjorie, with a little cough. "Men do take queer fancies into their heads now and then."

"Very."

"However, I will do all I can to help you—though, of course, you must promise to be very good, and never, under any consideration, to flirt again."

"I'll promise."

"Then the best way is for you to come to us."

"Where?"

"I don't know—I'll make Charles take a house in town. Now that we have scared your poor papa to death, I suppose we are not wanted any longer here."

"Poor papa!"

"Yes; but it will do him good in the end. Is he up yet?"

"No; he has had some gruel in bed."

"May it make him penitent, and more inclined to obey the orders of his superior officer, your good mamma. Where would you like us to pitch our tent in town, Rose?"

"Oh, somewhere near Mecklenburgh Square."

"In it, if you like. Charley is rich, and can live where he likes, thank goodness! Then that is settled?"

"Yes."

"And you will come to us?"

"With pleasure."

"When?"

"As soon as we can get him back to town."

"And the *preux chevalier*? By the way, what is his name?"

"Vere."

"Of what country?"

Rose colored.

"Really I don't know."

"But where do his family reside?"

"I cannot tell you."

Marjorie elevated her eyebrows.

"Do you know nothing of him, then?"

"Very little. But General Grantham, with whom I was staying at the time, introduced him as the son of one of his oldest friends. And he moved in the best society."

"Well, time will show. At all events, we can soon find out all about him."

"Yes," said Rose; and leaning her chin upon her hand, she fixed her eyes upon the glaring coals, and fell to musing about the lover of whom she knew so little.

The door opened, and Mrs. Cowley entered, looking worried and perplexed.

"I don't know what to do!" she exclaimed.

"What is the matter, aunt?" asked Marjorie.

"I wish we hadn't played that fool's trick last night."

"Why? Is papa worse?" asked Rose, looking up.

"No; I can't say that he is really ill; but he seems so nervous and frightened. If the door creaks, he jumps; and I know what that feeling is so well. I had it all the time when we first came to this horrible house."

"Oh, he will get over that!"

"Yes; but, after all, I begin to think it was not right to frighten him so. A great, strong man does not faint for nothing. I can't think how I came to let you do it."

"But as it is done, let us try to repair the mischief, if any there be. Get him up, and send him down to the village shopping. He will come home as blithe as a lark."

"That is the worst of it."

"What?"

"I can't get him up."

"What do you mean?"

"He won't move. He says the whole house is full of ghosts, and that he means to stay where he can't see any more; and, oddly enough, I heard him just now muttering to himself that he wished Charles was here."

"My husband?"

"Yes."

"Then, what can be easier than to tell him that his wish is granted?"

"And that Charles is here?"

"Yes."

"My dear child, that would do very well with some men, but not with Mr. Cowley. He is as sharp as a needle; and if he found out that Charles had been in the house all night, he would guess at once where the ghost of the cabinet came from. And if he once found that out, I'm sure I should have a separate maintenance offered to—nay, forced upon me to-morrow."

"Oh, no; not so bad as that," was the cheerful reply. "I will manage it so that he need never know

we have been here before. Rose, you have already lent me half your wardrobe; give me the other half—your out-door portion. He will not recognize your hat and cloak, I suppose?"

"Oh no!"

"Then bring them, and send Charles to me."

Half an hour later, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Cowley left the house on foot, and walked away toward Banley. And as Mr. Cowley, senior, was partaking of tea and toast at six P. M., in the seclusion of his own chamber, a fly drove up to the door, and a knock was given that nearly shook the house down.

Mr. Cowley dropped the cup and saucer, and spilt the tea all over the bed.

"Good gracious! what can that be?"

"I will go and see, my dear. Lie down and compose yourself."

Mrs. Cowley went, and returned with a well-got-up face of astonishment.

"Well, what is it?" cried Mr. Cowley.

"Such a wonderful thing!"

"Out with it!"

"The most extraordinary—"

"But what?"

"In fact, I think, the strangest circumstance I ever heard of in my life."

"Confound it, ma'am!" bawled out her husband.

"Can't you say what it is, and not keep me lying here in a bath of lukewarm tea?"

"Well, Mr. Cowley, your wife was saying this morning that you wished your nephew Charles was here."

"So I do. I'd dig the whole place up if I had him to back me, and never think of feeling frightened."

"Well, Charles is here!"

"Nonsense!"

"I assure you he is. He has just returned from Australia, and he came to the door in the Banley fly. He has been to our town-house, and Mrs. Gray directed him here. And his wife is with him."

"Married?"

"Yes—to an English girl, though."

"If he had married a New Zealander, tattooed from head to foot, I should not care. Zounds! give me my clothes, Mrs. C.! This news is worth ten pounds, at the least. We'll rout the ghost out now, or my name is not Cowley."

"Yes, dear," replied his better-half meekly, as she helped him to dress.

They went down into the drawing-room together. No more ghosts—no suggestion of ghosts, even. A bright fire blazed upon the hearth—four candles lit the table, which was laid for tea. Rose and Catharine, in pretty evening-dresses, ran forward to meet their father as innocently as if they had never dreamed of scaring him half out of his senses. But he pushed by them unceremoniously, and rushed up to the hearth, where Charles Cowley was standing, like a true Briton, with his back to the fire.

"My dear fellow!" said the banker, shaking him by both hands. "You are as welcome as the flowers of May!"

"Why, so I hear," replied his nephew, demurely.

"You have been getting yourself into a bit of a scrape, I imagine, and want me to help you out. O you naughty old boy! But let me introduce you to my wife."

Mr. Cowley shook hands with Marjorie; decided, after his first glance at her, that she was a nice sort of girl; and then dismissed her from his mind entirely. He was burning for an uninterrupted ten minutes' conversation with his nephew, alone, that he might relate the wonderful things that had befallen him. Few men could boast of having seen three real ghosts, one after another! And Marjorie, like the other women, was sadly in the way just then.

However, there was no help for it. Tea was waiting, and Mr. Cowley, junior, fell to work upon the muffins, and ham, and tongue, like a man who had fasted all the way from Australia. When the cloth was taken away, his uncle breathed freely again.

The ladies sat gossiping together before the fire. The worthy banker rose, nudged Charles in the side, and whispered: "Come with me a moment."

Charles followed him from the room, merely pausing at the door to give a nod and a wink, expressive of great enjoyment, to the group he left behind.

Mr. Cowley seized his nephew by the arm when they stood in the hall, and dragged him up the stairs. A lamp was burning in the turret-chamber—a fire blazing on the hearth. Seeing this, as he opened the door, Mr. Cowley started back with a look of extreme surprise.

"Why, those born fools cannot think of putting you here to sleep!" he ejaculated.

"Why not?" asked Charles, looking exceedingly innocent.

"Why not? The jades! I'll have no tricks played off on the people under my roof. I know it is the fashion to put the guest in the haunted room, to see if there really is a ghost there; but, by George! we want no such feats here! They shall give you another apartment—it is like their impudence to get this one ready!"

"What? Are the village tales really true, then?" asked his nephew, with a look of the greatest interest.

"What did they tell you?"

"That you were in a haunted house—with not one or two, but a perfect legion of ghosts around you!"

Mr. Cowley groaned.

"They are in the right. I have been introduced to four since my arrival; and if you had not come to-night, I should have struck my tent and run away, in sheer terror and desperation."

"Four ghosts! You must be joking, uncle. You never used to believe in such things, you know!"

"Ah! but I do now! It is no joke I can assure you, to see three such horrors as I have seen. And there is that beast of a cradle that will go on rocking in the butler's pantry. You can't see it, but you hear it directly under your feet."

"Ah! the girls were telling me something of that. But I confess I thought it was only some of their nonsense!"

"I wish it was! However, now that you have come, I don't care so much for anything of the kind as I did before. You'll see me through it—won't you, my boy?"

"Through what?"

"Why, I'll dig the old place up by the roots, but what I'll come at the bottom of that cradle business. I fancy that all the other disturbances arise from that."

"I should not wonder," replied Charles, thinking of the tale he had heard in the Australian tent.

"And I am very willing to help you."

"I knew you would be. And now just look round this chamber, Charles."

"Well, it is a very pretty room."

"We must sound these walls, and take up this floor. There's something wrong here, too."

"Indeed!"

"Why, I was sitting over my cigar the other evening, as innocent as a lamb, when the door opened, and a great hulking negro came in, leading a bleeding nun by the hand—You young villain, what are you laughing at?"

"My dear uncle, it is too absurd to think of such things happening in this sober, matter-of-fact century."

"Why, you puppy! do you mean to say I am inventing the story?"

"Oh no; but you might have fallen asleep—"

"A likely thing for me to do! I tell you I saw them as plainly as I see you now. And the nun's hands were tied; and, by George, they came so close to me that I could have touched them if I liked."

"Why didn't you?"

"Well, if you must know, they tried to touch me! And I bolted."

Charles nodded his head, and showed his teeth.

"The wisest thing you could possibly do, under the circumstances."

"I see you don't half believe the story. But I swear I was not asleep. And that was not the end of it—for last night I saw another!"

"Ghost?"

"Yes, sir; and in this very room."

His nephew looked incredulous.

"In this room, sir—a woman dressed in red, with a black mask. And she held a confounded lock of hair in her hand that I had seen before; and her face. You are laughing again, you unfeeling wretch! I'll say no more. I'll give no orders to have your room changed. You shall sleep here to-night; and I hope with all my heart she will appear to you, and make you sing out of the other side of your mouth. Laughing, indeed, at such a story! I'm ashamed of you."

And the worthy gentleman trotted indignantly back to the drawing-room, and never spoke to his nephew again that evening—not even when he took his candle and bade them good-night before he sought the turret-room.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DAY or two passed before Mr. Cowley and his nephew could put their valiant projects into execution. Meanwhile the ladies found the house exceedingly dull. The two gentlemen were always closeted together; the weather was inclement; the box of books from Mudie's failed to come; and, to crown the whole, Christmas was fast approaching, and they knew well that they ought to be in town.

On the evening of the second day they were sitting together after tea, in Marjorie's little turret-room. Mr. Cowley and Charles were in the parlor, hatching some plot against the ghosts together, and Mrs. Cowley gave a tremendous yawn.

"So dull!" she exclaimed. "Rose, child, do read something."

"Very well, mamma; here is the new book papa brought the other night"—and the girl's eyes twinkled mischievously as she began.

THE DOCTOR'S STORY.

On my eighteenth birthday, I commenced the study of medicine, and with a proud heart placed my name upon the books of—College. I had heard much of the vagaries and madcap escapades of medical students, but, to my surprise, I found myself among a quiet and intelligent set of young men, who seemed much more intent upon mastering the mysteries of the divine art of healing than upon wrenching off knockers, and who seemed more inclined to mend bones than to break them. As I was studiously disposed also, we got on well together.

But we had an original character among us—a demonstrator of anatomy, who was on the most friendly terms with many of his class. He was a dark, silent, unhappy-looking man, who seemed to have a most singular and unaccountable repugnance for all the details of the profession he had chosen. He would shiver if, by chance, he touched the skeleton in the lecture hall; he would turn pale over operations, and often faint in the dissecting-room, scalpel in hand. No one could imagine why he had chosen to study medicine. We often discussed the question among ourselves; and one night, when he entered the hall soon after we had been exhausting conjectures, an inquisitive student asked him point-blank the very question we all longed to hear answered.

"Dr. Lee, why do you dislike these things so?"

He was smoking; but he laid down his cigar, looking very pale, yet seeming willing to answer.

"I will tell you why," he observed. "Long after I had mastered the science of anatomy, I received an invitation one evening to attend a private meeting at the rooms of a classmate—a meeting where a fine 'subject' would be dissected by the students alone. I went gladly. The corpse lay, face down-

ward, on the floor, and they were trying to lift it on the frame I had placed in readiness. I assisted them; and, as I did so, I fancied I felt a slight pulsation of the heart beneath my hand. But when we laid it on the board, I saw only a cold, pale face, and a stiff and rigid form. It was the face of a man some thirty-five years of age—dark, and cold, and proud. Even the heavy hand of death could not erase the haughty curl of the lip or the settled frown upon the brow. His hair was long and dark, but slightly sprinkled with gray; so were the thick mustache and beard. His eyes were half unclosed, and through the long lashes I could see that they had been black as night. The careless though rigid attitude in which he lay—the strong hand clenched, as if in some spasm after death, and those large eyes half revealed, filled me with a nameless terror. It seemed as if, though dead, he yet had the power to watch and understand our motions. I had never seen a corpse that gave me such a feeling before. Upon his breast and face was the stain of blood. I pointed it out to my companions.

"'Buried alive, most probably,' said one of them, carelessly, as he handled the scalpel. 'He must have struggled hard—for he is a powerful fellow.'

"'Look at his hand,' said another, lifting it from the bench. 'It is clenched so that the ring has cut into the palm below. Buried alive! It is astonishing how people can be so careless, now, when they have not even ignorance for an excuse. There is something in this face that unnerves. Mr. —, can you not close those eyes?'

"'Nonsense! let the eyes alone—he can see the better that we do everything right!' exclaimed the third. 'Are you all turning cowards over a dead body? Give me the sponge. Who begins?'

"He sponged the blood away. I stood near, still looking at the face of the corpse. The sponge, by some strange chance, had been filled with ammonia instead of water. The operator flung it carelessly upon the board close to the face of the corpse. In an instant, as the subtle vapor found its way upward, I saw a quick shudder pass through the limbs. The operator started away in terror.

"'Good heaven, he is alive!' he exclaimed, in a low, hoarse tone.

"I bent over him. I bathed his pale face with water, and poured a cordial between his shut teeth. Life came back, but slowly and painfully.

"He was quiet in my arms for a few moments; then, with a desperate effort, he lifted his head, and took in the whole scene at a glance. The lighted skull—the shining instruments, and the careless faces beyond—the love of life taught him what they all meant. He was too weak to speak; but he groaned and looked up in my face with those eyes—and they were brimful of horror and despair.

"'You will live,' I whispered. 'Drink this—it will revive you.'

"I snatched a bottle from the shelf beside me, and held it to his lips. I thought it was a cordial—it was a deadly poison!

"He drank, and fell back dead, this time, beyond all hope of revival. But, as he died, he gasped out, 'You have murdered me, and to the day of your own death I will haunt you!'

There was a long pause.

"Gentlemen," said Dr. Lee, solemnly, "he has kept his word. Heaven is my witness that I would not have harmed him intentionally—but I killed him, and night after night he comes to me. I can hear him speak, and those dreadful eyes look into mine wherever I may go. My bitter repentance avails me nothing. He will always be beside me. This is the reason why my profession terrifies me. And yet some strange spell binds me here; I could not go if I would. I know well what the end will be. Some day he will appear to me—to all of you—as I saw him that unhappy night. And then it will be my time to go."

He ceased to speak; and it was a relief when, a few moments after, some one started a conversa-

tion of the most imaginative kind. Dr. Lee listened as we talked, smoked his pipe, but said nothing.

We heard no more from that day of the vision that haunted him. His fits of silence and gloom grew less frequent, he mingled more with the students, and seemed in a measure to lose his dread of the deathly objects by which he was surrounded.

One day, at the college, on my way to the dissecting-room, I opened the door of the great hall, and looked in. It was empty and silent. The rows of circular benches were deserted, but a stray glove lay upon one of them; a faint and sickening smell of chloroform pervaded the place; and the foot of the suspended skeleton, whose grinning face was turned toward me, dangled to and fro, as if he was kicking it for his own amusement. I shut the door and left him to the solitude over which he seemed to chuckle.

The air of the dissecting-room was never pure, but on that day it was peculiarly fetid and nauseating. The mingled odor of burnt flesh and muscles, stagnant blood, and a certain indescribable dead smell such as any one may notice on entering a room that contains a corpse, greeted me as I went in.

Upon the table lay a headless body, the corpse of a man in the prime of life. I looked at it carelessly, wondering why the head had been removed. Suddenly I saw something that made my blood run cold.

The right hand was clenched closely. Upon the little finger was a heavy signet-ring, and the strong pressure had caused the stone to cut deep into the palm beneath. It was a little thing, but it brought the murdered man before my eyes as plainly as if he had been lying there instead of that unknown corpse.

Hurrying from the room I met a classmate on the stairs. He looked pale and excited.

"Have you seen it?" he asked, eagerly.

"What?"

"The body?"

"Yes."

"And the head?"

"No."

"It is the most singular thing—perfectly unaccountable. It gave me quite a shock, in fact."

"But why?"

"My dear fellow, it is the very face, feature for feature, of the man whose story Lee told us; and the Professor, fearing some bad if not fatal consequences from this strange resemblance, removed the head. It is lucky Lee did not see it."

"Lucky, indeed! I will keep him away to-day," I replied.

I hurried to his rooms. Much to my relief, he was there, smoking and reading. I pretended a severe headache, and asked him to accompany me on a long ramble into the country. He consented, and we spent a long, happy day among the green fields and lanes.

We returned late and very tired; and as there were two beds in my room, Lee consented to occupy one of them, in the place of going home to his own lodgings, which were at the other end of the town.

It might have been three hours later, when I was roused from a deep sleep by the consciousness that something was in the room, and bending over my bed. I had heard the words, "Are you coming?" in a deep, low tone, close at my very ear; but when I started up, I saw nothing. The moon shone in at the window, broad and full. I could discover nothing more than the familiar furniture and my little terrier sleeping quietly on his cushion in the corner of the room.

That voice, so deep and full, was still ringing in my ear. A vague terror was at my heart. I turned upon my pillow. As I did so, I saw, I swear I saw, through the curtains—that face! And the cold and gloomy black eyes were bent full upon me; and the clenched hand, with its signet ring, was raised to draw the curtains further away. The vision faded.

I looked over at the opposite bed. Lee slept quietly with a smile upon his lips.

I was glad that he did so, even in the midst of my own horror. I did not dare to raise my head again; but as I lay counting the slow ticking of the clock upon the mantelpiece, and expecting every instant to feel that clenched hand upon my own, a sudden drowsiness seized me, and, in spite of my terror, I fell into a second slumber, as deep and dreamless as the first.

I woke again, and quite as suddenly. I drew back the curtain and looked out into the room.

"Are you there, Lee?" I asked.

No answer came. His bed was empty. I rose at once and began to dress. Far up the lonely, moonlit road I could see a figure hurrying toward the college. I knew that it was Lee.

I knocked at the door of the next room, where the janitor of ours slept. He came and opened it.

"For God's sake, dress quickly and come to the college with me," I said. "You have the keys?"

"They are in the hall," he said, looking bewildered.

I went to the nail—they were not there.

"Lee has them—he has gone!" I exclaimed, wringing my hands. The janitor seemed to comprehend everything instantly, and hurried on his clothes in an instant. Going cautiously down the stairs we closed the hall door behind us. We leaped the hedge, for the gate was still locked, and ran swiftly up the road. But the lonely figure I had seen vanished long before we reached the college-grounds.

I paused a moment under the portico, and leaned against one of the pillars to recover my breath. The great hall door was open; we entered and stole up the stairs without a word. The moon lighted us.

We tracked him through the first and second halls, the lecture-room, and the library. Then we found the door of the second staircase unlocked, and knew by the faint sickening smell that came up that he had found his way to the dissecting-room. We paused in the hall outside its door, to watch his movements. His eyes were open, but it was evident that he was still asleep, and my companion held me back, whispering:—"Don't make any noise that will wake him suddenly. If he finds himself here with that corpse, he will die of fear. We must get him out into the open air before we speak to him."

The body lay as they had left it that night—a headless trunk—carved and cut in many directions by the scalpel.

Lee bent over it with an absorbed air. One hand held the keys he had taken; the other grasped the cold clenched fingers, seeking for the signet-ring. He found it—then he raised himself up with an anxious, thoughtful air. He walked slowly toward the window, and seemed to look out, though the heavy wooden shutters were closed with bars of iron, and the only light that entered came through the open door.

I sat down upon the stairs, and leaned my head upon my hand, for the fetid air sickened me. An exclamation of horror from my companion's lips roused me before many moments had passed, and following his outstretched finger with my eyes, I saw Lee in the act of unlocking a closet-door.

"The head is there!" whispered the janitor.

I sprang forward!—he followed me. The headless corpse was in our path. Our sudden entrance jarred the slight boards, and the body fell to the ground with a dull, heavy sound, that woke Lee from his sleep just as the key turned in the closet-door.

"Don't look there!" I cried, wildly. "Look at me, Lee, only at me, and you are safe!"

It was too late. That head, with the dark and haughty face (which at that moment seemed lighted up with a fiendish smile), was the first object that met his bewildered eyes. He started back—the sudden movement shook the shelves, and the head fell.

striking him full upon the breast, and then bounding like a ball upon the floor. He gazed at it a moment, with such a look as I pray I may never see in human eyes again. A sudden spasm distorted his face. He threw up his arms with a wild cry, and fell heavily upon the floor beside the corpse.

I sprung to his side, and raised his head. But it dropped again, till the dark brown locks mingled with the black hair of that head.

"Lee, speak to me!"

He was dead!

"Oh, how horrible!" said Majorie, shuddering.

"Rose, if you read any more such tales, I cannot stay in this house."

"Very well," said Rose, good-temperedly. "I only wanted to amuse you and myself. I think I have done neither."

She shut the book, and going to the window, looked out.

Presently she stole down-stairs, wrapped herself warmly in her cloak, and went out to walk in the grounds.

By the five o'clock train and coach of that evening, a strange gentleman arrived at a little roadside inn, about two miles from Hollow Ash Hall, and four from Banley. He was a handsome, foreign-looking man, apparently about thirty-four years of age—"A perfect gentleman!" as the landlady rapturously called him, because he drank her weak tea without complaining, and afterward sat quietly in his parlor over the wine and cigars, without giving any human being in the house the least trouble.

Secured from all intrusion, he watched the cold moonlight falling on the distant fields, and listened idly to the "Last Rose of Summer," played on a cracked piano, without much regard to tune or time, by his landlady's daughter, in the room below.

He sat still and pensive "in the golden light of the moon," and thought of his early, long-lost love, now so near him once again.

Would any secret instinct tell her that he was coming?

Would she feel his presence—his love—even before he had assured her of them?

Who shall say?

His thoughts grew dim and more indistinct. The song below, and the voices of people at the bar beyond, seemed to blend in one low, continuous murmur, but faintly heard, yet soothing from its very indistinctness.

His eyes closed—he slept—but in his dream, Rose was still with him!

He awoke, some time after, with a sudden start. The moon, now high in the heavens, shone full in his face, and showed the deserted street beneath.

A clock struck upon the stairs. It was just eight.

He uttered an exclamation of surprise, took his hat and cloak, and going out at the open front door, took his way alone toward Hollow Ash Hall.

And, as he walked, he thought of the quiet and beautiful English home where most of his boyhood had been spent, and where, in after years, the Rose of his life had bloomed for him—bloomed, but never faded! Among those trees and flowers his heart got roved in so deeply, that, to the day of his death, the fibers could never be wrenched away. He had gone far from the place; possibly he would never look upon it again; yet ever and anon, as he wandered through the world, a violet springing at his feet, a bird singing in the air, a lift of blue sky beyond the distant hills, made him young again, and brought the old house so vividly before him, that he could almost see the faces, and hear the voices, nay, catch the very words, of those who were living there, and who had doubtless forgotten him entirely.

He thought of those old times with a smile and a sigh, as he walked quickly along the village road. He thought of Rose as he had seen her there, evening after evening, laughing, singing, and flirting—

yes, certainly flirting, like a princess of love among her worshipers. He thought of a night when they had quarreled, and when he had left the house in anger, only to return and hide within the grounds, watching her jealously, as the curtains waving in the breeze gave him glimpses, now and then, of the lighted rooms. Oh, what sighs he breathed against the rough bark of the tree which supported him, as he saw her beautiful face, sparkling with light and laughter, turned toward the window! How, later on, he envied the partner who held her hand, or clasped her waist! How he had longed to be the flower in her bouquet, the spangle in her slipper, the very ground beneath her feet, so that he might but be touched or looked upon again by her! She had never known of this passionate devotion; and even he, going to seek her again, was half inclined to smile at the remembrance as a folly of the past. It was dead, that feeling; his affection was more rational now, he said to himself. But was he right? Do such loves—does any love ever die? I think not. What has once been a part of us, can scarcely fade into utter nothingness again. In another and more perfect state of existence, these elements of happiness, disturbed here, but peaceful forever there, will be our own again!

Their parting had been very much like all others, to all outward seeming. The tearful eyes, the half-choked farewell, were all there; and careless eyes looked on, and careless laughter arose around them. But I doubt if ever there was a sorer heart than Stanley Vere took with him as the train moved slowly away; as he caught the last glance from those soft eyes, the last wave of that snowy hand.

In such separations pity is wasted on the one who goes; it should be given to the one who is left behind, to follow each daily occupation, yet forever miss the voice and eye that once lightened and illumined them.

But the breaking up of such an attachment is no light thing, and to him the world seemed suddenly dark and cold. Missing Rose, he groped blindly on his way, as if the light of his life had gone out. In fact, she was the only one who had stood between him and the world. Others might have a mother, a father, a brother, or a sister, to stand between them and that harsh and cruel judge. He had but her; and when she was taken from him, all those sweet ties were rent in the one that bound them together, and he stood face to face with all antagonists, unarmed and unshielded. He tried to supply her place, not because he was inconstant, but because he loathed loneliness. In every instance he failed. Those whom he sought had other ties and friends; at best, he could only occupy a secondary place within their hearts. What was more important to him was this—they were of the common order of women. Their souls were narrow—their brains capable of supporting only one set of ideas. Probably he wearied of them, but it is certain that they wearied him most unbearably.

Now Rose, with all her girlish fun and gayety, had a noble soul, that fed upon high thoughts; and intimate association with such a fresh, pure spirit as hers had unfitted him for any lower companionship. So it came to pass that he still went on his way alone; and in the valley of humiliation, or on the mountains of peace, his cry had ever been, "Will she ever come back to me? Shall I find and win her back again?" He asked that question, standing in the public road, and looking up at the white walls and lighted windows of her present home. As he gazed, he saw a figure—a female figure—pacing up and down the lawn. His heart told him who it must be. In a moment he was by her side.

"Rose! Rose! will you welcome me back?" he cried, in a voice that trembled with eagerness.

And she, pale and startled, but smiling all the while, put both her hands in his.

"Dear Stanley, welcome!"

And so the question was answered.

CHAPTER XIV.

It was a beautiful morning—almost as mild as if it had been an autumn, rather than a December day. The sun had advanced just high enough in the heavens to pour down his mildest and warmest beams; and the near village and the distant hills were bathed in the golden light, as of old the fair Eden spread its beauty forth for Adam's admiring eyes.

It was a blessed day. The most careless heart could but drink in its beauty in a thankful mood; the fresh, sweet air brought a color to the most pallid cheek. It was hard to look out upon the glorious scene, and realize that a world so lovely and so fair should be the home and haunt of all that was detestable and base—that the serpent Slander, and the gaunt fiend Care, and the demon of Murder, with his red right hand, could fling a shadow over all this beauty, and cause each heart that had loved it once, almost to curse its memory in after years.

And yet, even the [singing of the blithe birds on that lovely winter's day seemed to say that this might be so—seemed to say that the little children sporting joyously in the village street might live to feel that blighting scorn which worldly spirits only understand; that those pleasant rustic homes, scattered like visible blessings here and there, might be the haunt of fiends in human form and the burial-place of the heart's best affections.

For the singing of the birds, in some strange way, seemed to speak that morning of one sorely-tried and tempted in her earthly pilgrimage, but now at rest where no earthly malice could disturb her—of one whose sweet eyes would have gazed in calm contentment on that lovely scene, had no false words ever kindled the flame of love within her breast, and then left it to go out in darkness, in bitterness, in tears, and death!

Yet, on that day, a deed apparently unsuited to the silvan loveliness of the scene was about to be done. On that day, the record of the past was to be rudely searched—the grave made to give up its secrets and its dead.

Having undertaken the task, Mr. Cowley was determined to accomplish it, and yet he would have given worlds, as the hour drew nigh, that he had never meddled with the matter—never come to Hollow Ash Hall.

His nephew also seemed nervous and ill at ease. As for the ladies, they scarcely spoke, but sat huddled together over the drawing-room fire—all except Rose, and she was wandering over the house like an uneasy spirit; till, at last, they missed her entirely.

The morning was rapidly waning away, and, at last, Mr. Cowley rose from his easy-chair with the air of a man who has made up his mind beyond the power of a change.

"Come, Charles, let us get it over," he said gravely.

They went out into the hall. Rose met them there; and by her side stood a tall and handsome gentleman, with a foreign air and appearance.

"Father," said the girl, eagerly, "come back into the library for a moment. This gentleman knows the secret of the haunted house, and is about to tell it to you."

Mr. Cowley stared, as well he might.

"And who may this gentleman be?" he asked, somewhat stiffly.

"A friend of the Vernons," was the quick reply.

"Let me tell you the story of the haunted room."

They went back into the library together, and this was the substance of the story which he told them of the dead girl, the ruined family, and the deserted house.

Marion Escourt had been a favored child from the very hour of her birth. True, her young mother died that she might live; but a sister of that mother, good and pure as she, took the infant to her heart, and cherished it for the sake of the dead. Marion's aunt was one of earth's saints; and, under her loving

care, the child grew mild, and good, and gentle—beloved by every one who knew her. Her father was an old man, and, being the possessor of great wealth, he chose to indulge his only and darling child in every wish she expressed. He seemed but to live that he might please her; yet, strange to say, in spite of all this injudicious fondness, she was quite unspoiled.

A slight touch of haughtiness there might have been in her manner; but she was no more to blame for that than that her eyes were so large and dark, or her form so reed-like and graceful. With the beauty of her mother, she had inherited the stately manner of her father; and though she moved among her friends with the stately dignity of a young princess, no one seemed disposed to quarrel with what became her so well, and was so sweetly tempered with modesty and gentleness, and all good gifts.

Years passed on, and added the arch fascinations of girlhood to her other charms. Her playmates were forced to select their cavaliers from the list of her rejected lovers. And yet her heart seemed all untouched.

At last she made her choice. It surprised every one. Her second cousin, George Vernon, a graceless, drinking, and dicing Oxford student, won the treasure for which so many had longed in vain—won it almost without an effort on his part—won it without dreaming of its value, or knowing how to appreciate it.

When, by the advice of a dear friend, she knelt at her father's feet, and told him of her love, the old man burst into a storm of anger, threatened her with the loss of home and friends, threatened her also with his own curse; but it was all in vain! She was his own child. She inherited all his pride and haughtiness, though these qualities had been kept in the background by the gentle teachings of her aunt; and when he attempted to thwart her dearest wishes so openly and determinedly, her pride and will were aroused, and her soul opposed in all its native fierceness to his own!

That night she fled! The morning brought a letter from her, saying that she had chosen to share poverty with her lover rather than enjoy wealth without him. At the same time she prayed her father not to cast her utterly from his heart, but to think of her in kindness and mercy, for the sake of the long and happy years they had left behind them forever.

Marion was by no means one to be discarded and forgotten where she had once been loved; and though at first her stern old father forbade all mention of her name, and threatened to disinherit her at once, her memory, gentle, kind, and loving, as she had always been till that fatal night, gradually disarmed him, and by degrees they came to speak of her again around the home-hearth, and to send many a loving wish and thought to follow her in her wanderings.

It may be that her father felt that he had driven her to desperation by his harshness; for, as time softened the first sting of agony, he grew more kind and gentle, and often encouraged his faithful housekeeper to sit and talk for hours with him of her they had both loved so well! At that time, if she had returned, he would gladly have welcomed and forgiven her. But ah! as the poet says, "if only the dead could know at what hour

To come back and be forgiven!"

They do not know, nor do the living, till the appointed time has gone by, and either the forgiveness, or the time for receiving it, has passed away. No tidings came directly from Marion—her father did not even know the exact place of her residence. A flying rumor reached him now and then, but all was uncertain and mysterious; and at last even this scanty information ceased, and her name was spoken softly and tenderly, as

"The household name
Of one whom God hath taken."

Her father moaned for her silently but sincerely; and all could see, by the bending of the stately form and the silver threads that glistened in his jetty hair, how the estrangement, and silence, and separation were eating his very life away!

Her life should have been a happy one. But there is a certain dusky gentleman who is supposed to be mixed up with the affairs of mortals, who must, I think, have laughed in his sleeves when chance sent a young widow to dwell in the vicinity of the newly-married pair.

She was a woman of good birth and high family, though so reduced in circumstances as to be obliged to add to her scanty income by private tuition in the more genteel families around Banley. She was a fine classical scholar, an artist, an authoress; and in addition, danced like a fairy, played and sung like an angel, and rode like Die Vernon herself. Her tall, elegant figure, her deep mourning, the easy grace of her motions and the dignity of her manners, had already moved George Vernon strangely; and though she was a brilliant rather than a beautiful woman, with her wondrous smile, her flashing eyes, her bewitching manners and easy grace, she placed him where she had so often placed his betters—at her feet!

The dusky gentleman, to whom I have already alluded, having his implements upon the ground, lost no time in using them. Mr. Vernon and the governess met often, and it needed no spoken words to tell the enchantress all he was feeling. His words—his sighs—the long, ardent glances of his handsome hazel eyes, told the story only too well; and smiling sometimes to herself at this new proof of her power of fascination, she gave him some slight encouragement from time to time. He did not love her; and yet, at last, he walked up and down his room at midnight, thinking while she was sleeping quietly, and would have laughed heartily at his employment if she had known it. He was only doing what a thousand men have done before him—what a thousand more will do after him—flinging himself at the feet of a woman who would lead him through a tempest of passion, and leave him at last, bankrupt of faith, of feeling and honesty, and all else that to the noble heart makes life at all worth the living.

And all this time, what was Marion doing?

This house was even more lonely than it is now. There were few country-seats around, and even with their tenants, Mr. Vernon had little or no intimacy. People did not quite understand him or his position. There were rumors afloat that touched his character closely; and even Marion was supposed to be—not a lady, a relative, and his wife—but a person of inferior birth, some even thought her a servant, who had consented to reside with him without troubling herself about the formal ceremony of marriage. He must have known that this was the general impression, and yet he never contradicted it in any way. So no one ever came to the Hall, and Marion wondered a little at the unsocial neighborhood, and heard nothing for a long time of the dangerous intimacy her indifferent husband had formed.

At last, the tale leaked out through the good offices of her own maid. She was shocked and indignant; but something impelled her to seek Mr. Vernon at once and know the truth. She went down into the study, where he was lounging in an easy-chair, smoking a cigar, and thinking, probably, much less of Mrs. Vernon than of Mrs. Moore. He laid aside the cigar, and she sat down beside him, and began her hopeless task.

Hopeless—how hopeless every woman must know. For all men, even the best, and bravest, and gentlest, are cowardly in their dealings with women, and will evade a downright inquiry if it is in their power to do so. It happened, therefore, as a mere matter of course, that Mr. Vernon told his wife an absolute falsehood, and made her believe at last that she had been deceived, and he slandered, by the reports she had heard—highly colored ones, let us own.

She believed him.

But the next day both he and Mrs. Moore were missing. They had fled to Australia together.

The shock drove Marion mad for her time. And in her frenzy she destroyed the life of her infant, which was born before she recovered.

The stranger ceased to speak, and Mr. Cowley stared at him with much bewilderment.

"How do you know all this?" he asked, at last.

"Because I am Stanley Vernon, the only brother of that unhappy man," he said, quietly.

Rose uttered a little cry of astonishment.

"Yes," he added, "this shameful family history made me almost loathe my name. I have borne that of Vere for many years. Under that name I met and loved your daughter, sir—under my own, I shall soon ask you for her hand! But for the present, let it be my task to clear up this mystery.

"I came home from Italy as soon as I heard his house was let. It was a mistake upon the part of the agent; but I should be the last on earth to regret it. But I must take precautions against a similar event. This is no fit habitation for any one."

"Then it is really haunted?" asked Mr. Cowley.

"I fear it is. Rose, will you go to your mother? and, gentlemen, will you follow me?"

They obeyed him without a word. He went straight to the butler's pantry, and took up a spade and pickaxe, already placed there by Mr. Cowley.

"My brother's wife died delirious, and no one ever knew where she had buried the child, which it was quite certain she had destroyed. I had my suspicions at that time, but I longed to hush the whole thing up as speedily as possible. Now, however, all must be made clear."

With a few vigorous strokes he took up the floor of the room. A tiny skeleton, half-bedded in the moist ground, met their eyes, and Mr. Cowley turned away to hide his tears.

"Poor thing!" he said, sadly. "Charles, don't tell your aunt, or wife, or cousins, but get them away—take them to town this very afternoon. Mr. Vernon and I will follow as soon as this poor little creature has been properly buried. There, go, my dear boy; and, above all, not a word to the girls of what we have found to-day."

So Mrs. Cowley had her way after all, and spent a happy Christmas Day in Mecklenburgh Square, surrounded by all the members of her family, and waited upon at table by no less a person than Mrs. Macarthy, to whom she clung as a kind of fellow-sufferer from the whims of the head of the house.

Christmas and New Year's Day having passed gayly away, there only remained the wedding of Rose: and for that I need not hint that the greatest preparations were made.

The happy day came slowly on. The tidings of the romantic betrothal had awakened much curiosity among those to whom the pair were known; and the church was crowded when their carriage drove to the door.

Rose faltered slightly as she stood on the threshold of the church, and gazed upon the concourse of people; but a glance from the dear companion by her side reassured her, and, calm and happy, she moved onward, and took her place before the altar.

Not to the haunted house, however, but to a pleasant villa on the sea-coast, Mr. Vernon took his fair young bride.

And as they sat hand in hand in their new home—the doubts and follies of the past all forgotten and forgiven—the moon rose slowly above the water, and a bright path, stretching out over the waves of life's sea, and waiting but for their footsteps, seemed lying there before them.

He put the fancy into words, and whispered it to Rose.

She looked up in his face with a frank, truth-telling gaze. Those were the very soft, clear eyes—clear and quiet as a mountain lake, yet with a slight

shadow in their depth, that seemed to tell of stormier elements below, of which he had dreamed for years, and which he had only seen twice in his life—once in a picture of the Virgin by Murillo!—once here!

Here was the only heart his own had sought—the only being for whom he had ever really suffered the pangs and pleasures of that mad fever which we call by the name of love. No other could claim her from him! No other could watch that bright young face in all its bewitching changes! No other could rest that pretty head upon his bosom, and play with those silky curls! No other could kiss the broad, high forehead, the beautiful eyes, or the full, warm, loving lips! But still he murmured in her ear, as he held her closely to his heart that first evening in their common home:

“Are you happy, Rose? Are you sure you are happy?”

There was no need to ask that question. A perfect stranger coming into that pretty cottage by the deep blue sea might well have answered it for him.

It was a pleasant spot, none the less so, that everywhere were traces of the presence of its pretty mistress. A speaking portrait hung over the piano, a smile lingering archly on its parted lips; her favorite books were on the table; her little dog played about the grounds; her horse neighed in the stable; and a fairy-like boat, bearing her name upon the stern, rocked at anchor upon the pebbly beach below. And she was here, there, and everywhere about her small domain, while her husband's eyes followed her continually with looks of love.

Running down the graveled walk, with the little dog barking and leaping by her side: feeding her horse with snowy bread; presiding with all the grace of a woman, yet with the sweet, shy bashfulness of a child, at her table; or singing and playing, after the evening meal, sweet, low ballads and dear old songs such as she loved best, filling every spot with

beauty and grace, and forming the delight of her husband's eyes, as well as the pride of his heart—is she not happy?

I assure you, dear reader, their home is one of the sweetest spots on earth. And, full of content with the bliss of the peaceful present and the promise of the cloudless future, they have quite forgotten the tragic and painful past, and have no wish to go back to their early years, or to revisit that scene of a heart rejected and a slighted love avenged.

For Hollow Ash Hall is a ruin! Given up to the bats and the owls, and carefully avoided by everything human, it has fallen gradually into total decay; but the ground has been sold, and an enterprising cockney talks of building a soap factory there—so it is within the bounds of possibility that the ghost may yet be exorcised by alkalis and noxious gases.

Mr. and Mrs. Cowley still reside in Mecklenburgh square, with their nephew and niece, and Mrs. McCarthy now reins supreme over the whole household. But Catharine is no longer with them; she is the wife of a dashing Guardsman, and goes to Court, and is so fine, generally, that so humble a pen as mine shrinks nervously from attempting to record her daily life.

George Vernon died penniless and forsaken, in Australia, soon after the mystery of Hollow Ash Hall was made clear.

But the “Vernon Arms” is still flourishing, and the host as jolly and talkative as ever. And as Christmas is the kindest and most prosperous season of the year with him, any one of my readers who feels inclined for a country-jaut cannot do better than go to Banley (I give him my cordial permission to find the place), and there, over a flagon of the best old October, hear this story of the haunted house told on the spot, and far better than I have had the power to relate it!

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